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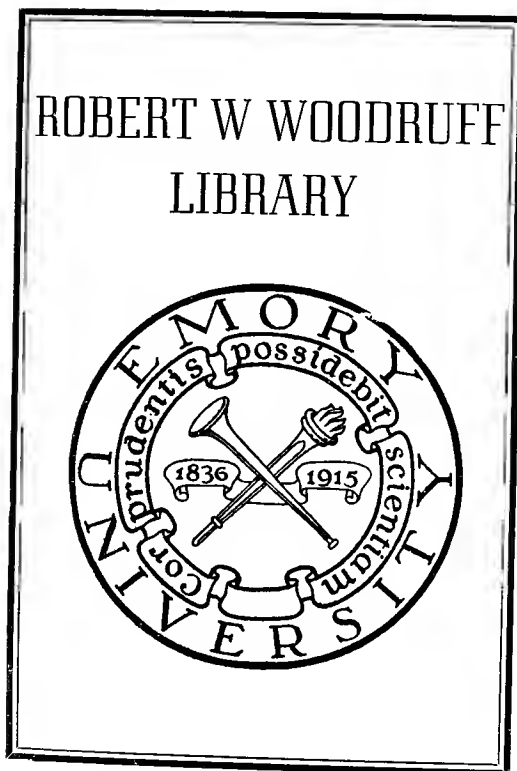
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A Novel

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OF

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"A MENTAL STRUGGLE," "LADY VALWORTH'S DIAMONDS," ETC.

SEVENTH EDITION

WARD AND DOWNEY.

12, YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN, LONDON

1889

CHARLES DICKENS AND EVANS,
CRYSTAL PALACE PRESS.

A MODERN CIRCE.

CHAPTER I.

SHOWING HOW MRS. DUNDAS CAN SPEAK AND REFRAIN
FROM SPEECH.

"MARRY him? why did I marry him? Oh, well," said she, with a little light laugh, "that's just it, you see. I wish I could tell you. I do really. But the fact is, I don't know myself."

She stopped, as if she had said all there was to be said, and dropped another lump of sugar into the little delicate eggshell cup before her.

"Money is a power," remarked her cousin sententially.

"And he is possessed of it? Yes——" she paused again, and then looked up with one of her brilliant smiles. "There is something in that, I dare say," she said airily.

"I must always think, that anything so unsuited as——"

"As he is to me? That's so, certainly," interrupted Mrs. Dundas complacently.

"As you are to him, I was going to say," went on her cousin, with a calm glance.

"Were you? You should show more speed." She smiled again, and turned her lovely face full upon Constantia. That the girl regarded her with distrust and suspicion she knew, but the knowledge cost her nothing. A good many people regarded her in the

same light. There was amusement to be got out of it always, and sometimes a little revenge, which to women is often sweet. "And so you think Mr. Dundas too good for me?" she said, leaning forward and fixing her great velvety eyes on Constantia.

"That does not matter—and I did not say so. What really surprises us all, is, that you did not marry Lord Varley."

"Lord Varley!" Mrs. Dundas for quite half-a-minute regarded Constantia with a settled attention, over the head of the Maltese terrier lying upon her lap. Having satisfied herself, she went on. "Oh!" she said, with the air of one who has solved some troublesome puzzle. "I hardly understood you. He was not Lord Varley then—when I knew him, you must remember."

"When you were engaged to him."

"At that time—yes." A little gleam shot from her dark eyes. She had given Constantia plainly to understand that she had forgotten all about Lord Varley, even to his right signification now, which, indeed, had not been the same in those old far-off days when she had been considerably more to him than she is in the present. Her answer had been slow, but surely full of meaning. And yet the girl would not understand! "He was only Mr. Grande then," she continued, in a perfectly even tone.

"Must that be remembered? Is it part of it?" asked Constantia, with a little grave glance that sat rather funnily upon her mobile features. "Well, even so, we had all so entirely made up our minds to your marriage with Frederic Grande, that we could scarcely believe it true when we heard that the engagement had come to an end."

"Yes, it came to an end," said Mrs. Dundas. "More sugar? You look as if you wanted—something."

"So I do—an answer to my question. Tell me, Donna, why you and Frederic said good-bye to each other for ever."

"Not for ever, I hope. He is in the neighbourhood. you tell me." She laughed a little here and

sleeve, with a slow, graceful gesture. Her long lashes lay upon her cheeks; it would have been impossible for Constantia to see her eyes. Even if she had done so, she would not have understood the curious expression that brightened them. "You ask me why we parted," she said, after a hesitation that was hardly remarkable. "Is it possible to remember, I wonder? It seems only a thing of yesterday, that little affair; yet I cannot recall it. We parted"—she paused—"because—chiefly, I think, because of what the vulgar would term jealousy. On *his* part, you will understand. He was always a trifle difficult, that poor Frederic! There was a wretched little Italian prince, and there were his presents—*chocolats* in elaborate boxes—or were they pearls? One forgets. At all events, after them came the deluge—for Frederic. You put me through my paces, so I feel bound to recollect if it were pearls or sweetmeats. But really it tries me; it is so long ago."

"Let us say pearls," said Constantia drily.

"By all means, if you think it fits more neatly, and gives better cause for the rupture. A rupture it was, with a vengeance. He has a vile temper, that dear Frederic. But, fortunately, mine is good. I bore admirably with his ravings and reproaches, that were all about nothing, when one comes to look into it. I expect I am well out of it, though I really do think, if it had not been for that German count, I should be Lady Varley now."

"The Italian prince, you mean."

"Ah, true. It's quite all the same thing. Certainly it was some one. And so he is in the neighbourhood? And his wife? Of what texture is she? Fine?"

"Superfine," said Constantia warmly.

"You would be as good as a book if you did not require to be questioned," said Mrs. Dundas frivolously.

"Superfine, you say. Inside or out?"

"Both. As regards her soul, beyond all doubt; though I will admit that her face is not so assured. To me—to many—she is as beautiful as a saint; to you——"

“And such as me, she may be ugly as the devil! Is that what you would convey?” She lay back in her chair and smiled in a light, amused fashion.

“What are you smiling at?” asked Constantia quickly, with a little frown.

“At Lord Varley and his devil.”

“A saint, I *said*.”

“That makes it all the more laughable. At Lord Varley and his saint, then, if you will.”

“Travelling has not improved you, Donna,” said her cousin coldly, after a few moments’ observation.

“No? You think not? Yet many people have told me otherwise,” said Mrs. Dundas amiably.

She lay back in her chair again, and looked out of the window. The sunset was glorious, and some of its crimson rays entered the room and fell—as if in love with her—around her chair. It was as old-fashioned an affair as comfort of the most modern order would permit, and it suited her to perfection as she lounged in it, in all the easy insolence of a beauty that admitted of no question.

She was a tall woman, but so exquisitely formed as to make her height forgotten. Her *svelte*, lithe figure was yet full, and she tapered towards all her points. Her hands, her head, her feet—all were small.

Her hair was red. Not auburn, or chestnut, or *blond cendré*, as our French neighbours so kindly have it, but red, pure and simple. She and her maid (who was an invaluable person and who adored her) had rendered it darker by a tone or two by means of numerous costly washes; but it was still red, and just now was quite beautiful as the dying sunlight glittered upon it, playing hide and seek between her brow and her ear.

It was a very nimbus, and might have been used as a decoration to a mediæval angel. Mrs. Dundas herself was remarkably like an angel, with her broad, fair brow, and her eyes of sapphire blue. Her skin was like ivory—a dazzling white.

Her mouth interfered a little with the heavenly picture. It was large, *riante*, and yet, when one looked

at it, a trifle—*just* a trifle—cruel. Yet it was good-natured, too. That she felt little, cared little, would endure little throughout her earthly pilgrimage was written in clear letters upon her unruffled brow.

She laid her delicate, much-beringed hand upon her beautiful bosom now, and coughed faintly. This broke the spell of silence. Perhaps she had broken it purposely, with a view to asking another question or two of her guest and cousin; but if so, Constantia thwarted her, albeit unconsciously.

"You have told me nothing yet about Mr. Dundas," she said.

"Why should I? You have met him—doubtless judged, and favourably, too." There is not an atom of rancour about this speech. "You remember you gave him the palm when comparing him with me? Let us, therefore, skip the old boy and go on to something more interesting." She gave a little pull to her exquisite tea-gown of lace and satin as she said this, as well as a smart slap to her terrier, who was growing troublesome, and unfurled her fan. "About the country, for example," she said.

"That might be an old story to you. It is the same to-day as it was years ago, when you lived here, but for a few paltry changes."

"Those paltry changes mean all the rest. Tell me of them."

"Of the decline and fall of the Briscoes? The rise of the bloodless Murphys? Would such gossip interest you?"

"There is more than that. People known to one grow colourless; those unutilised, desirable. Tell me of the new, the fresh."

"There is Lady Varley."

"Ah! What of her, beyond the fact that her wings have been already provided?"

"That is what puzzles me," said Constantia a little uncertainly. "I do not believe she can be altogether above the rest of us, and yet——"

"Well, go on. Don't make a mystery out of nothing, my good child."

"I don't think she is altogether happy in her

marriage," said Constantia, who was too young to grasp the meaning of the side lights, and who would have bitten her tongue out before making this avowal, had she known the thoughts that lay within the breast of her companion.

"What! Not with the irresistible Frederic? His temper was not considered his strong point in the old days, you will recollect. If she is now indifferent to him—By-the-bye, it is a trifle too soon to be on bad terms, eh?"

"Bad terms does not express it. There is something vulgar about that. I only said that—I—*thought* she was not happy. I am sorry I said even that," exclaimed the girl anxiously; "but you I can trust, Donna—I suppose?"

"Suppose it by all means." Mrs. Dundas smiled blandly, and threw a biscuit to the forgiven terrier with an unerring aim. "But they have been married—how long?"

"Two years. There was some arrangement between the families—some money matters—that made it almost a necessity that they should be married. Not a vital necessity, of course; but something sufficient to create a marriage if there was no strong reason to prevent it. Yolande's father had set his heart upon her marrying Varley, and Yolande was too frightened to resist."

"Frightened! Is your saint, then, a fool?"

"The old man was paralytic. They said another stroke would kill him. He was especially anxious about the match because Yolande was alone in the world, and Frederic was her nearest relative, and the estates adjoined. I can understand such a fear as that. The old man on the verge of the grave, and her acceptance or refusal of his decree the point on which his life might hang. Yolande obeyed him."

"Which all means that she married Varley, not caring for him."

"At all events, she married Varley, not caring for any other man."

"That is a point gained, certainly. What an interesting little cousin you are, Constantia; you tell one so many things. How can I sufficiently reward you for

dropping in upon me to-day and dissipating my dolours, and giving me your company at my five o'clock gossip?"

"I was glad to come and see you," said Constantia, who by nature was honest, "for one thing, because you are my cousin; for another, because you were known to me during all my earlier life. You had dropped out of it, of course; your long residence abroad made a gulf between us; but we have passed that now, and I hope we shall renew the old relations."

"You are immensely too good," said Mrs. Dundas, who was evidently more amused than she cared to show. Indeed, the little stereotyped manner of the other accorded but grotesquely with her fresh girlish face, her frank eyes, and her nineteen years. "I may tell you that Mr. Dundas is charmed with you. That flying visit of his to this part of the world two months ago resulted in an undying—well, let us say, friendship for you. Strange, by the way, isn't it, that his ancestral halls should be situated in the same county as Lord Varley's?"

"That occurred to me," said Constantia.

"The severity of your manner conveys much. There was nothing in it, however. I did not know of Frederic Grande's accession to the peerage when I married Mr. Dundas. I did not even know he had gained his uncle's lands. It astonished me too when I heard that Mr. Dundas (whom I met in Rome about a year ago) had property in Ireland. A foolish possession in these days. But he laughs at Parnell—who, we all know, is the modern Machiavelli—and persists in preferring his home at Ballymore to any of his other houses."

"I expect you will change all that. Ireland, just now, is dull."

"Do you call it dull?" Mrs. Dundas grew animated. "Dull when bullets are flying, and one hardly knows, *if* they go to bed in safety, whether they may not rise to find the house in flames? I call it exciting. I am delighted he has elected to pitch his tent here, just now."

"You are easily pleased," said Constantia Mac-

Gillicuddy, with a gay little laugh. It tickled her immensely, the easy way in which her cousin took the Irish difficulty. "We hope all things," she said. "But of what use is that when Mr. Gladstone has set his foot down—upon us?"

"I do trust you don't go in for politics," exclaimed Mrs. Dundas, looking really anxious—she could always look exactly how she wished, *not* how she felt. "In Italy I got a sickening of that. Let us return to some interesting matter. As I shall live here for some months to come, I want you to post me up about my neighbours."

"Well, there is Mrs.——"

"Oh, never mind the women, tell me about the men."

"If you want the very latest comer, there is Mr. Stronge of Inchirone."

"What! He here too? The world, small as it is, is full of surprises. We met him abroad—*not* Mr. Dundas; Uncle Timothy and I. He was quite a pet of Uncle Tim's, but I am bound to confess he did not affect me much."

"Where is your Uncle Timothy now?" asked Constantia, remembering with a sudden rush of friendly thought the kind, gray-headed old man who was her cousin's guardian, and who, if only a vague memory to her, was yet a gentle one.

"Dead," said Mrs. Dundas pleasantly.

"Dead! We never heard it!" Perhaps Constantia was more shocked by the callousness of her cousin's tone than by the intelligence itself. "Dead!" she said again.

"Why, yes. Quite a long time now—three months if a minute. I thought you must have heard of it even in these benighted regions. Why, he died before my marriage. Indeed," with a little smile, "I shouldn't wonder if his departing this life in the hot haste he did (heart disease they told me it was, afterwards) had not a good deal to do with my present arrangements."

"You mean——?" questioned Constantia, who had shrunk rather away from her.

"That my uncle, when he died, left me without a *sou* wherewith to bless myself—or dress myself, which was a much more important matter, as the law forbids us to go about unclothed, but is light on the matter of prayer. You are evidently one who must get to the root of the subject, so I explain to you. I was destitute, in a foreign land." She paused as though struck by this remark, and then broke into a charming laugh. "It sounds like one of those printed charitable appeals, doesn't it?" she said; "*that* makes one laugh, but in reality it was unpleasant. To find oneself utterly stranded is inconvenient. Feeling this, I looked round me. I had dismissed Frederic—that is, Lord Varley. Counts and marquises innumerable were at my feet, but where was the money that would have helped to make life sweet with them? Nowhere."

She made a little graceful gesture with both her hands that suggested to the onlooker a puff from a southerly wind.

"Upon the whole matrimonial horizon, so far as I could see, there was only John Dundas. He was twenty years older than I, and hardly my beau-ideal of what a husband should be; but he adored me, so I gave in to circumstances and married him."

"I dare say you might have done worse."

"*Far* worse! He is immensely rich, and thoroughly believes in me."

"Why should he not?"

"Why, indeed! Sweet cousin, your words are ever full of wisdom. I am so glad you came to see me to-day. You are positively exhilarating; and when one has been in a house for only twenty-four hours, one naturally feels depressed. But not with you, my pretty cross-examiner. A truce to frivolity, however! Let *me* be the examiner now. What more of the country side? Mr. Stronge you have mentioned. What brings him here?"

"He, or his father, purchased property here some years ago."

"Rash man, whichever it was. I'm inclined to think it was the Mr. Stronge we know, as I greatly doubt his ever having had a father."

"He had, nevertheless. He has been made famous through his blankets."

"A good snug fame, at all events. Nothing cold, or—er—well, perhaps there *is* something embarrassing about it. Never mind. Even if your Mr. Stronge doesn't admire *me*, I can admire his blankets."

"He isn't my Mr. Stronge."

"No? The more fool you. The repose that marks the Vere de Vere is something, but in winter the repose that may be gained between the blankets is much more. It can't be always May, you know, my dear Connie, and if anything *were* to happen to you—if, for example, your aunt were to seek shelter in a warmer planet, what would become of the lot of you?"

"That is a question that need hardly be entered into now," said Constantia coldly. "My aunt is quite well."

"So I was sorry to hear."

"And as to Mr. Stronge," indignantly, "I consider it positively indelicate your so speaking of him. To say nothing of his birth—he is at least forty——"

"He is thirty-five."

"He is not the sort of person to whom we have been accustomed," said Constantia, with a faint frown and a touch of hauteur. "You have said only the truth when you spoke of his want of birth. There is something very brusque about him—a roughness, a lack of repose——"

"A lac of rupees," put in Mrs. Dundas gaily. "That should square everything. Innumerable lacs are his. There, don't look at me so indignantly, I *quite* understand. Repose of manner is certainly to be desired, but a fortune, although made out of blankets, is better still. Take it, my dear girl, if you can."

"I think I shall take my departure, at all events," said Constantia, rising to her feet, which were exquisitely formed, if rather roughly shod.

"You would leave me—desert me? What brutality!" cried Mrs. Dundas in an agonised tone. She rustled out of the deep recesses of her chair with the activity of a mischievous kitten, and seized hold of her cousin. "You shan't go!" she declared. "Make up

your mind to *that*. And as to your dreaming that you are offended with me, put that out of your charming head altogether. It is a charming head, I assure you, Constantia, in spite of the murderous frown that is at present darkening your brow. You have a head and face that would have reduced Miss Manners—the last American importation, the latest success in pork, the beauty of our Rome season—to despair! Indeed, you are rather like her.”

“I don’t fancy, then, that I should be one of Miss Manners’ admirers.”

“Of course not,” wilfully misunderstanding the angry modesty of the reply; “you and she would have been rival beauties and at daggers drawn. I meant only a compliment in comparing you to her, though I certainly think the compliment was to *her*. She was flawless, however, in colour and skin. There was only one mistake about her, and that was her name. She hadn’t a manner in the world.”

“I am beginning to think that that is of little consequence.”

“Very good, very good indeed,” cried Mrs. Dundas, clapping her hands. “Tell you what, she’d have been nowhere if you had been beside her!”

“And how about you?” asked Constantia sarcastically; “were you no enemy within the camp?”

“Well, I guess I ran her pretty hard,” confessed Mrs. Dundas, with such a careful imitation of the nasal tone that Constantia was assured belonged to Miss Manners, that she gave way a little, and smiled.

“That’s right,” said her cousin; “now that we’ve jumped that fence, sit down and tell me all about it.”

CHAPTER II.

SHOWING HOW A PRETTY GIRL SOUGHT TO TEACH PROPRIETY TO A MATRON, AND HOW GREATLY SHE WAS WORSTED IN THE BATTLE ; AND HOW LADY VARLEY CAME TO SEE MRS. DUNDAS FOR THE FIRST TIME.

"ABOUT what?" asked Constantia.

"The county, of course. You began, you grew angry, then silent. I still wait to hear who else adorns this portion of the Emerald Isle on which a cruel fate has cast me."

"It was your home once." Miss MacGillicuddy had reseated herself, and was now making friends with a macaroon. She was still young enough to like cakes of all kinds, and macaroons, as a rule, her household didn't run to. "The Moores still vegetate within the old Manor, and the vicar is godlier and mouldier than he was. There was never any one like him, I think."

"There is a good deal of consolation to be got out of that bit of information," said Mrs. Dundas meekly. "Well, go on."

"Garrett Barry has inherited his uncle's property after all—though that terrible old Englishman always declared he shouldn't—and is now living at Belleisle."

"Ah! Garrett Barrett, I remember him also—just a little. He was charming, eh? A genuine Irishman—a trifle *farouche*, perhaps, but amusing always. *He* can't be all, however; there must be somebody besides your blanket man and this splendid specimen of the early Irish."

"The Harringtons are always at Cairn."

"I know. Mrs. Harrington as English as ever?"

"A trifle more so; it grows on her as she gets older. She now quite shudders when the word Ireland is mentioned, and dreams out loud, impossible dreams of flying to some unknown shore."

"Does she still keep on wondering why she married her husband?"

"Yes; she wonders still, almost as hard as you do."

"For a youthful maiden, you have an admirably

human: you have erred, my pretty Constantia. I think I told you exactly why I married Mr. Dundas."

"Yet at first you gave me the idea that——"

"Never mind the 'at first' of anything. Allow for the shock of receiving so blunt a question without a kindly forerunner to give one a warning, and time in which to answer it with becoming solemnity." She delivered her rebuke with the most careful artlessness.

Constantia coloured. "Blunt"—yes, she had been blunt. And yet it was hardly her nature to be so. Her sudden contact with this lovely, red-haired cousin of hers, after all the years of silence between them, had set her teeth on edge somehow, and taken all the softness out of her, and thrown out all her coolness. The Donna she knew now, could never have been the Donna (as far, at least, as she was concerned) in whom she had so firmly believed in her childish days. Was it a touch of artificiality in the lovely woman or the some-time mockery in the large eyes? The quick drooping of the long lashes to conceal those tell-tale orbs, or the almost imperceptible curving of the perfect lips when such and such things were said? She could not tell. Donna was evidently kindly, laughter-loving, ready to condone; *bon camarade* doubtless, and with a generous air; but was there no subtlety, no unscrupulous will beneath the merry mask?

For all that, rudeness was an inexcusable thing, and acknowledgment of it necessary.

"I am sorry if I said what was displeasing to you," said Constantia, colouring highly.

"I will tell you one great truth, Constantia," said Mrs. Dundas, shutting up her fan with a resounding click. "You are too pretty ever to say anything displeasing. Say what you like, they will condone it."

"They?"

"Men! Never think of anything else. The rest don't count. Get men on your side, and there you are! Now to proceed. We have had Mr. Stronge, Garrett Barry, and Lord Varley. Any more?"

"There is Mr. Featherston," said Constantia. There was a faint hesitation, a vague difference in her

tone as she pronounced his name, and Mrs. Dundas looked fixedly at her.

"Is he the favoured one?" she asked, leaning forward with a smiling eagerness, and thus throwing an additional touch of brightness into the already bright picture she presented.

"No," said Constantia, without addition to this bald denial. Nevertheless, the denial cost her a blush.

"No? With that lovely colour on your cheeks? Will you swear it has not been born for him? Do you know where even good little girls go to when they tell a fib? There! Don't eat my head off; it was a simple every-day question, after all. And you must pardon me if I still go on believing that, if he is not *the* one, he is at all events one of them. Naughty girl! At your age to have so many strings to your bow!"

Constantia laughed.

"I don't fancy I have one real string," she said. "Not one that would not snap, were I to pull it a thought too fine."

"Pouf!" She snapped her long, lovely jewelled fingers in the air. "That! for such a fancy." Then, with a little gay air: "Seriously, I should be only too glad to believe you. The county suggests itself to me as being dull, and if all these young men were your special property——. I would not be uncousinly for worlds, but you will understand that it is a necessity with me to amuse myself."

"As how?"

"Have I not said? The tyrant man is the one thing that truly diverts me. Not this man or that—*any* man will do, provided he can speak the Queen's English, and moves in the world in which I live. I hold that it is quite possible to knock a month's laughter out of the very dullest of them. You see, I am not greedy. You shall have your choice, and I shall not interfere; but the others must be free game."

Miss MacGillicuddy grew slowly red. She looked down. For the moment she knew she was looking shy, and this increased the extreme anger and disgust she was feeling. She knew, too, that Mrs. Dundas was watching her with eyes openly amused, and this did not tend

to decrease the indignation. She conquered herself sufficiently, after a while, to be at least able to speak.

"You mean," she said, still with her eyes on the carpet, "that you would permit them to—to—to pay attentions to you?"

There was righteous horror in the girl's tone. Mrs. Dundas, hearing it, and seeing the girl's pretty, flushed, and angry face, fell back amongst her cushions. She looked what she was—unutterably amused.

"To put it so broadly shows crudeness," she said. "Time, however, the all-powerful, will no doubt teach you that—so that I shall spare you my lecture, and refrain from giving you the lesson on the polite skipping required in decent society, that is on the tip of my tongue. Just now, if you were at a loss, you might have said you failed to understand me, or something of the sort."

"That is a lesson," returned Constantia. "But I cannot benefit by it. I did understand you, thoroughly. You meant you would find your amusement in making a man love you, and then laughing at him. I thought one never did that after one was married."

Mrs. Dundas broke into laughter, noiseless, but full of mirth to overflowing. Yet not a sound escaped her. It was a little way she had. There would be no sudden declaring of her mirth—no movement of the body, no click even of the never absent fan, and then all at once, when you turned to her to know why she had not answered your last question, you would find her in a very agony of laughter. She did not purposely suppress it. It was only, as I have said, one of her little ways, and she had many. Strange as it was, there was something in it catching too. Something, that if you were in the mood for it, would take you, and compel you to join in with her in her silent merry-making. If you were not in the mood, however, it was indescribably annoying.

Just now Constantia was not in the mood.

"Yes?" she said, with distinct and scornful interrogation in the innocent monosyllable. She gazed at her cousin steadily, with sombre eyes, and in her usual downright fashion. Mrs. Dundas after a bit dried her

eyes, and pulled herself together in what she meant to appear a very penitent manner. But it was still abominably full of enjoyment of an enraging kind.

"You are propriety itself," she said. "A very Una. It would be impossible to say how much I honour and admire you—and do not desire to imitate you. I hope it will last with you—or perhaps I should rather hope it won't. 'Be virtuous and you'll be happy, but you won't have a good time.' You know the new copybook text? 'When one is married.' Was that *your* text? Do you know," she glanced up here, and changed her tone to one deeply confidential, "it is an absurd—an almost incredible thing, but there really are moments when I entirely forget I ever was married!"

"Do you forget Mr. Dundas too?"

"Often, *often!*" with airy compunction. "Terribly to be deplored, isn't it? But now that I have found you, my Una, I feel sure that I shall make an immediate departure towards the right path. You will be of inestimable value to me. You will jog my memory. You will expose my sins. I shall presently be a reformed creature—a new light. You think honestly you will be able to undertake me?"

"I think you can talk as much nonsense now as you did in those old days when I was a little child, and fondly believed your folly wisdom."

It was not a pretty speech, certainly; but Miss MacGillicuddy was the oldest of a family who were all famous for saying just what they thought just as they thought it, and who seldom flinched from calling a spade a spade, no matter what might be the consequences. Of each other they expressed their opinions—favourable or otherwise (otherwise, as a rule)—with a noble openness and an enjoying frankness not to be surpassed. Life in such an atmosphere could not but produce a certain honesty, which generally means, when you come to look into it—that is, when it is directed against oneself—a decidedly objectionable freedom of language.

"What a fearful speech!" said Mrs. Dundas gaily. "I expect you'll turn my hair gray before I've done

with you. I don't mind the accusation of talking only nonsense. Nowadays that is a charm, an accomplishment. But that remark about your age; that was annihilating. Were you only a child when last I saw you? Was I quite grown up? Am I so *many* years your senior? Come, let me face the horrid truth. Your age, Constantia?"

"Eighteen."

"And I am twenty-five! Quite seven years between us! A century, rather! I should be looking for my first gray hair." She rose, and ran to a mirror let into the wall of the little *bijou* apartment in which tea had been served. It ran from ceiling to floor, and reflected her beautiful, tall, radiant figure and lovely face, as though it loved them. "There is one comfort," she cried, running her fingers through her crisp locks, "red-haired folk seldom grow gray until death is near. It is hard to kill the obstinate crimson. That is the consolation Nature offered us when she dyed us this unholy colour. Well"—she turned back to Constantia—"and so, when last we were together, I was as young as you are now."

"No; very much older."

"I don't think so. For a country maid, you can hold your own pretty well. Confess, now, it was not civil of you to remind me that I grow an old woman," she laughed merrily; "but I am magnanimous—I harbour no uncharitable thoughts, I forgive you. Be equally generous—you—and grant me absolution for all the misdemeanours that in your heart you are imputing to me."

"You are wrong; I was not condemning you. Why should I condemn?" asked Constantia, with a slight contraction of her brows.

She was irritated, offended; she herself was hardly conscious why. Some inner sense of delicacy was hurt by the other's whole air. She looked at her cousin with wide eyes, in which lay surprise and distrust; her beautiful cousin, lying back amongst the velvet cushions, in the lounging position that she had learned was so well suited to her. Donna as a girl had been a favourite with her, Donna as a woman is

strangely distasteful. Yet withal, there is something about her—some marvellous charm that attracts her even as it repels.

“Why, indeed?” replied Mrs. Dundas artlessly. “I say, what a game little gown you’ve got on! Where did you get it from? White? Worth?”

Constantia coloured.

“How likely it is,” she said, with a reproachful glance, “that I should be able to order a gown from White—or Worth!”

“No? I’m often stupid,” smiled Mrs. Dundas penitently. “But to look at it! And do you mean to tell me you have a woman in this benighted village equal to that costume? If so, it’s a shame; she has evidently a soul above the buttons to be procured here, and should get a helping hand to a higher sphere.”

“Should she? I’m the woman. I made the gown you so affect to admire, myself,” said Constantia, not—I regret to say—without a blush of shame. This betrayed a poverty of mind, for which she was even more ashamed afterwards.

“No, really?” questioned Mrs. Dundas. “I wish I were clever like that. It’s about the most desirable turn-out I’ve seen this many a day, and it fits you like a glove.”

Her tone was very kind and appreciative, and her admiration sounded true. Indeed, it *was* true. The girl’s dress of simple cotton looked charming, and suited her lissome figure and *débonnaire* face to perfection.

“Mr. Dundas is always raving about the superiority of simple elegance over the more florid tastes,” Mrs. Dundas went on, in her soft monotone. “Between you and me and the wall, he is a trifle close, and keeps a regular Judas’ eye upon the money-bags. If he could see you in that gown I should not hear the end of it until the gown itself was in the rag-basket. If, my dear Con, he should chance to—Ah! Talk of the—of an angel; here he comes.”

Mr. Dundas entered the room. He was a large man, tall and well-built; at least twenty years his

wife's senior. He might not take a first prize where beauty was in question, but certainly he would be highly commended. His face was grave, his hair slightly grizzled. His mouth was firm, and perhaps a trifle stern when in repose. There was, indeed, a touch of severity about the whole man that impressed one, and suggested at the first glance that he would be an unsafe character with whom to play fast and loose. He looked vigorous, strong to endure, and silent. He was in all respects such a contrast to the graceful, easy, smiling creature who was his wife, that one could not fail to remark upon it.

He came up the room with a long, steady stride to Constantia, and shook hands warmly with her. He liked her: one could see that.

And then his eyes sought his wife; and then it was clear to all the world, had it been present, and certainly to Constantia, where his whole heart and soul lay. Such a wonderful brightening of the cold eyes! Such a softening of the firm lips!

Mrs. Dundas moved a little as he came towards her, and changed the expression of her lips. She leant now across the tiny table at her side, and held out to him a welcoming hand, with the pretty pink palm upwards.

"We were just talking about you," she said, with an enchanting smile; "wondering what kept you, and how long you *could* keep away." There was a most exquisite reproach in the last words. "Tired, Jo?"

This "Jo" was a little pet name she had for him. John he had been christened, an appellation that exactly suited him; and "John Anderson my Jo" she used to call him in those first days, when he had been intoxicated by the knowledge (delicately conveyed to him by her) that he was more to her than any other man on earth. Thrice blessed knowledge!

This playful cognomen had naturally dwindled by degrees into the more easy "Jo." It delighted him. The simple word, falling from her lips, could, even at his gravest moments, win a smile from him. He now held her hand for a second or so in a warm, fond clasp, and then dropped it. He could not kiss it. Constantia

being present; but he felt, in letting it go without the caress, as if he had sustained a loss.

"Tired? No," he said, with his calm smile. "Would nine or ten miles tire any man worthy to be so called? I assure you, Miss MacGillicuddy, this little woman," laying his hand softly on his wife's arm, "regards me in the light of a puny boy, and deems me 'tired' if I wander from her sight for an hour or two."

Miss MacGillicuddy is so struck by the difference in his wife's expression since his appearance, and so lost in an endeavour to reconcile her allusions to him when absent with her manner to him when present, that she fails to make him any reply.

"Tea?" said Mrs. Dundas sweetly, looking up at him.

"I think so—yes." He spoke as one whose thoughts are elsewhere, and then brightened. "I knew there was something," he said; "something I wanted to tell you. As I came through the lime walk, I saw a carriage with the Varley liveries driving down the avenue."

Mrs. Dundas started perceptibly, and in so doing shook his hand from her shoulder. She glanced at the mirror near her, and involuntarily lifted her hand to smooth her already beautifully arranged hair. This is, however, a trick common alike to all women, good and bad. Constantia, therefore, thought nothing of that; but she *did* notice the start and the change of colour that accompanied it.

„Why didn't you say so sooner?" said Mrs. Dundas almost sharply, with a quick glance at her husband. She was evidently a little shaken out of her usual idle complacency. He had no time to reply, however, before the footman threw open the door and announced "Lady Varley."

She came in with a half smile upon her lips and a kindly light in her eyes. A slender, graceful girl, very cold, very self-contained, with a subdued haughtiness that was born with her, and was no spurious offspring of her marriage, yet full of a sweet graciousness that sat most perfectly upon her. She looked only a girl, in spite of her three years of wedded life, and her motherhood. Her face was singularly devoid

of colour, being a clear ivory; her lips were pure; her eyes rather deeply set and very earnest; beneath them great purple shadows lay—shadows that added to their gravity, but had nothing to do with delicacy. Her dark hair was coiled in a loose knot at the back of her head.

Donna rose and went towards her. Involuntarily she looked past her to the door, but no one else came in. She received her visitor with a delicious little touch of friendliness, being, perhaps, freer to do this in that the kindly door had admitted no one but her. Lady Varley seemed struck by her, and pleased.

“So more than good of you to come so soon,” said Donna prettily, when Lady Varley had greeted Constantia affectionately, and Mr. Dundas with the courtesy that belonged to her. By this time Donna had recovered any little embarrassment she might have known. If not better dressed, her gown was, at all events, more rococo than her visitor’s, and there could be no doubt as to which woman had the greater claim to beauty. Constantia had been right when she hinted that Lady Varley might not please the many. Her face was too pale, her mouth not prone enough to laughter. Sometimes a glance from the earnest eyes had power to check unkindly mirth in others. Of the soul shining through those eyes few cared to know. Society likes to laugh. Society has nothing to do with a soul. There are, too, few things so tiresome as a woman with a conscience.

“I am so glad to find you at home—to make your acquaintance really,” said Lady Varley in her low, distinct voice. “One may go on for ever leaving cards without knowing anybody. And I half feared this lovely day might have tempted you to go out.”

“When one has only just come to a new place, there are so many little things one must see to oneself, if one is to live,” answered Donna, who never did anything. She put on quite a little housewifely air, that sat charmingly on her, and would have been perfect on a mimic stage. Lady Varley smiled in quick appreciation, and Mr. Dundas told himself he had married an angel. Constantia looked down and

frowned. "But I am glad I could not go out," went on Mrs. Dundas, with one of her brilliant smiles, "as my staying in has enabled me to see you." Then quite suddenly: "Lord Varley did not come with you?" She changed her position, and fixed her eyes full upon her visitor as she asked this.

"No, unfortunately. On Monday we heard of your arrival. On Tuesday Lord Varley was obliged to go to Dublin. Business will, I am afraid, keep him there for a week or ten days. On his return," she looked at Mr. Dundas here and smiled sweetly, "he hopes to call upon *you*. Mrs. Dundas and he are, I know, quite old friends."

Her manner was simple, and very cordial.

"She knows nothing," thought Donna, watching her closely. Satisfied on this point she removed her gaze, and a faint sigh of relief escaped her.

"I am giving a dance on the seventeenth," said Lady Varley. "The invitations have been out some little time, but I hope you will waive ceremony and come to me." She flushed slightly. She was still at heart a girl, and a touch of shyness now and then shone through the calm that was natural to her.

"That will be delicious," cried Mrs. Dundas gaily. "What a charming chance you offer me of seeing all my neighbours at once, instead of wasting a month or two over it! Are they pleasant, these neighbours?"

"They are very much like all other neighbours, I suppose. Some are just as one would have them, some are——" she paused, and smiled expressively.

The smile impressed Mrs. Dundas. "Constantia's saint can be severe at times," she said to herself. "I wonder, when a month or two has gone over our heads, in which category I shall find myself?"

CHAPTER III.

SHOWING HOW MULCAHY HELD HER OWN, AND HOW AN
ARDENT LOVER FAILED TO RECOMMEND HIMSELF TO
THE POWERS THAT BE.

“Divil a bit!” said Mrs. Mulcahy.

As she gave way to this powerful remark, she placed her arms akimbo.

“Moderate your language, Mulcahy,” said Miss MacGillicuddy. This was not Constantia, it was her aunt—a gallant spinster of some fifty summers, who ruled with a brazen arm over the five luckless orphans whom an unwise father had left, when dying, to her tender mercies. She was tall and bony, and of the horsey type. Her complexion was so sallow that the so-called whites of her eyes caught the reflection of it, and her skin seemed insufficient for the covering of the bones that started generously all over her.

To contradict her was treason; to annoy her, suicide. She tramped up and down the small house they called home from morning till night, scolding, accusing, reviling the two servants and the five nephews and nieces without drawing breath. She was the terror of the village school-children, the scourge of the parish. Like Satan, she went to and fro seeking whom she might devour. Even Donna, in the old days, had confessed to being afraid of her.

Poor soul! There was very little money in her household, and poverty embitters! All her life long she had struggled with it; and when the children came to her, they brought with them but a scanty pittance, that barely paid for their board and the somewhat erratic education they had received, and were still receiving. The two younger boys went to the vicar daily; that righteous man having agreed to pound into their brains as much Latin, Greek, and English as they would hold, out of the goodly store that belonged to him, for a sum too small to be named here. Let his good deeds follow him. That small sum he gave to the widows and orphans of his parish.

Constantia had been educated by a distant connection; Phil, the eldest brother, was now going through Trinity, helped by the same kind but cold hand. After Phil came a girl—Norah, a thin, angular little creature, with a shy, expressive face—who underwent an awful tuition under her aunt. Constantia taught her music, but Miss MacGillicuddy insisted upon keeping the English in her own hands.

It was a struggling household; Miss MacGillicuddy spent her life trying to make both ends meet—a sad employment. She was old, she would fain rest; but the sitting down and the folding of the hands at eventide was not for her. She must still be up and doing. The butcher must be sharply interrogated; the baker was always open to suspicion; the grocer required a clever eye upon him. By degrees, indeed, she had grown to regard these three estimable men as her most inveterate enemies. They were harpies, thieves. To them all her money went, and she forgot to remember that they gave her something in exchange for it.

One luxury she allowed herself: that was the power of changing her religious opinions as often as she chose. To-day she was High Church, and worshipped vestments and candlesticks; to-morrow Low Church, with a virtuous horror of the decent ritual. She had supported the Presbyterian minister who held his chapel in the lower end of the town, and after a bit had openly deserted him, and given her countenance to the Methody parson who spoke through his nose to his followers at the upper end. Just now she was pleased with the vicar because he had given her excellent cabbage plants for the vegetable garden, and so was pretty orthodox in her views; but one could not be sure whither the next wind would blow her. She had, however, never been a Roman Catholic. Priests stank in her nostrils.

She was very likely to hold with the tenets of the Church for some time to come, because her mind was fully occupied with a mission. She adored missions. She had within the past month enrolled herself as a member of the Blue Ribbon Army, and was now occupying herself making converts right and left. She was

very successful with the old ladies who never drank anything save tea, and with little children who believed lemonade was the modern name for nectar. The two younger boys, aged respectively ten and twelve, went down to the vicar every morning with broad bands of blue ribbon stitched with aggressive publicity upon their coats, and because of them suffered martyrdom as they went by the boys belonging to the college. This college was kept by an English clergyman, with a voice extraordinarily English, and a wife, and a baby or two. The boys scoffed at the little MacGillicuddys as they went by, in the exquisitely cruel manner that boys can, until their little hearts were sore within their bodies; often reducing the youngest child, who was of a sensitive nature, to tears. Mr. Evans, had he heard of these unlawful proceedings on the part of his scholars, would have been seriously annoyed, no doubt, being himself one of the chief apostles of the Blue Ribbon movement; but as for Miss MacGillicuddy, she cared for none of these things.

She entered with zest into the new crusade. It suited her admirably. It gave her the power of wounding any amount of respectable people; it made her feel more righteous than those who still clung to the pernicious glass of sherry. These she called wine-bibbers, and read them long lectures, in which the Rechabites largely figured. She arrayed herself in blue ribbons. It was an excellent mission, and an economical one; it put a full stop to the wine merchant's bill. But she would have been very angry had you hinted at this.

Just now she was bent on the conversion of Mrs. Mulcahy, the cook, who now and then used to take "just a thimbleful nate" for the good of her "stomick," she said. It certainly wasn't for the good of her head, which was considerably the worse for wear after each of these thimblefuls. But as Mrs. Mulcahy never remembered anything about it the next morning, she never could be brought to believe this. It was a wonderful thimble of every shape and size, and was a matter of unceasing speculation with the younger MacGillicuddys. Mrs. Mulcahy was, however, an invaluable

servant, who had been in the family for forty years; and as her thimbles were partaken of only three or four times in the twelve months, dismissal on account of them was never dreamt of. But to convert her—to show her the error of her ways, and induce her to ornament her person with a square inch of blue ribbon—that was Miss MacGillicuddy's dream!

"Do you remember Thursday fortnight, Mulcahy?" she asked now, in a sombre tone. On Thursday fortnight the thimble had last been put in requisition.

"That was the day Miss Norah broke your chany cup," said Mrs. Mulcahy, who, however, understood her perfectly.

"I was not alluding to that cup; I was reminding you of a cup that should not cheer, and does inebriate. You know well to what I allude, Mulcahy. You should learn to resist that cup."

"I niver was much of a hand at larnin' anything," said Mrs. Mulcahy doggedly; "an' I'm ould now, anyway, to begin. As to the cup ye spake of, I niver take anything out of a cup, save it might be me tay, and shure ye wouldn't thry to deprive a poor ould woman of that. Ochone! I remember well in yer father's time, whin——"

"Never mind about that," interrupted Miss MacGillicuddy hastily. Mrs. Mulcahy noticed the haste, and her small eyes twinkled. She was a large, stout, comfortable woman, and always wore a huge mob cap, as white as snow, with no less than four lace borders in it. She nodded this cap now sapiently. "Keep to the point," said Miss MacGillicuddy sternly. "Your habits of intemperance are growing on you, and I would have you check them before it is too late."

"Faix, there's one thing," returned Mulcahy briskly—"that the dinner will be too late, unless ye mane it for to-morrow, if ye keep me here idling much longer."

"Do you call such earnest pleading idling?" cried her mistress vehemently. "Do you mean to tell me you have no desire to save yourself—to draw back from the brink—to join yourself to the royal regiment of volunteers who glory in the blue ribbon and cold water?"

"Divil a bit!" said Mrs. Mulcahy again, even more

strongly than before. She seemed, indeed, quite struck with the noble simplicity of this remark, and smacked her lips over it.

"Am I to understand by that immoral sentence that you refuse to join us?" demanded Miss MacGillicuddy, drawing nearer. Her voice rose high and shrill, her throat quivered. She had mounted her hobby, and was prepared to ride it fast and far. She reared her crest and glowered upon the offending cook, who stood firm, and bore the shock of battle bravely.

"I expect that's what it comes to, ma'am," said she.

"Which proves to me," exclaimed her mistress, with increasing wrath, "what I have for a long time suspected, that you are a woman with very unfortunate tendencies."

Mrs. Mulcahy swallowed this speech and digested it slowly. Then she spoke.

"There isn't a tindincy in wan o' my blood," said she, with a touch of injured pride, "barring ye're hinting at me uncle's son be the first marriage, who had a tindincy to a running sore on the left leg, save the mark!"

"You are either hopelessly ignorant or you wilfully pretend to be so," returned Miss MacGillicuddy, big with explanation; but Mulcahy, who was thoroughly offended, would not listen to her.

"Ignorance is bliss, ma'am, as the Bible has it, but I'm wide awake as to what you mane. You've come here to insult a poor lone widdy, who has sarved you an' yours faithful for forty year, an' I tell ye plainly, Miss MacGillicuddy, that luck won't come of it. What ails ye at all, miss, to be pullin' an' dhraggin' wid them mane-spirited cratures who would desthroy half the thrade in the counthry?"

"Publicans and sinners," said Miss MacGillicuddy in a solemn voice; "they are bracketed. Down with them! is the cry I would hear echoing through the land."

"'Twould echo a long time before ye got rid of the sinners, at all events," said Mrs. Mulcahy. "They'll last our time, I'm thinking, ma'am."

"Let us keep to the point," exclaimed her mistress, who delighted in this phrase because she was always wandering from it. "Can you say honestly that you see anything to object to in this temperance movement?"

"No—no," confessed the other cautiously. "'Tis chape."

"What do you mean, Mulcahy?"

"'Tis chape, I said. Divil a doubt of that! Yer friends won't cost ye much, anyhow. Tay in the morning, an' tay in the afthernoon, an' tay before ye go to bed, an' ne'er a dhrop of wine to warm the heart. Bad cess to such movings, say I. Arrah! in the ould man's time, what a difference there was! Poor ould mather, he'd be the last to——"

Again Miss MacGillicuddy broke in hurriedly.

"To the point," said she.

"Which I think it was tindincies," said Mulcahy ominously. "You're accusing me of them; but if it comes to a raal tindincy, there was yer own father, ma'am (may the heavens be his bed!), who had——"

"Be silent, Mulcahy," cried Miss MacGillicuddy, growing crimson. "Consider, woman, ere you go too far! What is it that you would dare insinuate of my sainted father?"

"Insinuations is far from me," declared Mulcahy, who was still truculent. "The blessing truth for me, says I. You're accusin' me of a love o' the dhrop, an' what I says is, that your own father (glory be! for in spite of his tongue he was as fine an ould gintleman as ye could wish to see, wid a nose like a radish!)—what I says is, that if tindincies and dhrink is to be stuck down my throat, that he hisself had the finest tindincy I ever saw for——"

"For what?" shrieked Miss MacGillicuddy, losing her presence of mind.

"For the sthrong wather, faix," roared back Mrs. Mulcahy, undismayed. "An' more power to him. There was no maneness in this house when *he* kept it."

A merciful fate at this moment caused one of the junior members of the household to slip off the inverted tub in the scullery on which he was standing on tiptoe, with a view to looking through a crack in

the woodwork at the scene taking place in the kitchen. His heart was warm with a sacred joy as he listened to the promising skirmish within. He had been backing Mrs. Mulcahy so vigorously in spirit, that his body got infected with the enthusiasm, and he kicked out.

It was a disastrous kick. It landed him in an earthenware crock full of buttermilk, and the splash, the crash, the loud shriek that would not be suppressed, all produced a sensation that reduced the belligerents in the kitchen to silence.

For a moment only. Then simultaneously they cried "Scat" at the top of their lungs, and went for the scullery door. The little MacGillicuddy—Jimmy was his name—thought, as he still floundered in the buttermilk, that his last hour was come; but as vengeance sure and swift was descending upon him, a loud knock at the hall-door reverberated through the house.

Miss MacGillicuddy came to a standstill, and so did cook.

"Who's that?" said Miss MacGillicuddy, addressing no one in particular, yet evidently desirous of an answer.

"Who would it be but Misther Barry?" replied cook. There is scorn in her accent. On one point, at least, she and her mistress were at one. They both objected to Garrett Barry as a husband for Constantia, though he was a young man of fair means and good family, though in one sense of no family, as he hadn't a soul belonging to him alive, at least no one nearer than a cousin. This, however, should have been accounted to him as an advantage. Cook objected to him because she did not consider him sufficiently eligible for Constantia, whom she had nursed, and who was to her as the apple of her eye. Miss MacGillicuddy regarded him with disfavour from a higher standing-point. She looked upon matrimony generally as an indelicacy.

The young man's visits of late were of such frequency as to suggest the idea that he found a difficulty in living through twenty-four hours without

seeing the younger Miss MacGillicuddy. He had grown wondrous deferential towards the elder, and had endeavoured to win over Mulcahy (who was an old acquaintance of his) by arguments such as seldom fail with the domestic class. But Mulcahy, in spite of the thimbles, was not to be bought.

His knock was loud and buoyant, something like himself. It aggravated cook and her mistress to the last degree, but it saved the shivering Jimmy, standing in the scullery, dripping buttermilk as hard as he could. Miss MacGillicuddy put on an air of fell determination. She pulled her cap over her left ear (which was always a bad sign), adjusted her spectacles on her Roman nose, and made tracks for the drawing-room. She sailed upstairs, eager for the fray, and bent on stopping the irrepressible Barry in the hall; but fate, and Minnie, the parlour-maid, were too much for her.

Mr. Barry—as she entered the drawing-room feeling somewhat baffled—she discovered sitting there, beaming upon Constantia—who, indeed, was beaming back at him in what her aunt called a most unmaidenly way.

Pretty girls, as a rule, are heavily weighted in this world. Men smile on them, and if they smile back again, the world calls them coquettes. Constantia would have been perfectly miserable if any one had said she flirted with Garrett Barry, or with Mr. Featherston, or what Mrs. Dundas called “her blanket man”; yet certainly she bestowed pretty looks upon them all, and was always unfeignedly glad to see them, and, perhaps, sometimes said little things to them that she did not altogether mean.

Just now she was smiling deliciously, and it was evident that the young man sitting near her was in a very paradise of contentment. Constantia was charming. She had the proverbial Irish eyes—blue-gray, rubbed in by the proverbial dirty finger. Lovely eyes they were; coy, coquettish, alluring, repelling, as the owner willed. Her mouth was a firm little member, her nose saucy. She looked always as good and as true as she was. Her figure was as lissome and

pliable as a willow wand; and when she stood erect, with her lips laughing, and her eyes gleaming at you from under their long lashes, I can tell you she was a thing to dream of. She was, indeed, a thing whom many dreamt of.

"Ah, how d'ye do, Miss MacGillicuddy?" said Barry, rising to his feet and advancing towards that gaunt spinster, with an absolute effusion of manner. He was a tall, large-boned, sunny-tempered young man, with a mouth that was always making an effort to get at his ears; this probably came of much laughter. He delighted to laugh, and was altogether happy if he could only get you to laugh with him, or even at him—it was all one if you would only laugh. Life, to him, was a joke—the world a merry spectacle. He was born in Limerick, where his people had lived for many generations, and where they were much thought of; but an uncle's will, leaving him a considerable property in the County Cork, had brought him to that county. For the past six years he had been living in England, and considered himself specially English in many ways. He really believed he had quite an English accent, for one thing; but this was an egregious mistake; a Limerick man never reforms, so far as accent goes—and indeed Barry had one that, to use an expression of his own, "you could hang your hat on." Even here in Cork, they couldn't help wondering at it at times.

"I am suffering from no malady, I thank you," replied Miss MacGillicuddy, regarding him with a stony stare, "my health is perfect. There is no necessity for you to make such polite inquiries."

If she had hoped to disconcert Mr. Barry she was altogether mistaken.

"That's capital," said he cheerfully; "nothing like health. I'm just like you, as strong as a horse."

"I'm not a horse," returned Miss MacGillicuddy; "nor yet as strong as one. Your similes are not only wide of the mark, but——"

"Quite so," interrupted he wisely. "You are looking uncommonly well, though, let me tell you; any amount better than when last I saw you."

"Which was exactly twenty-four hours ago. Is

it your honest opinion, Mr. Barry, that people change much in that short space of time?"

"Hours—is it really only hours? Faith, I thought it was years," said he. He accompanied this speech with a glance at Constantia full of ardent affection.

She smiled (in spite of the trepidation she was feeling), through force of habit probably, and perhaps because she liked the glance, and Miss MacGillicuddy saw her.

"To some people," she said sternly, "lies are acceptable; to one possessed of rugged virtue they are not!" She paused. Evidently, Constantia represented the "some people," she the "rugged virtue."

"She's rugged enough, in all conscience," said Mr. Barry to himself. "But as for the virtue—there's no fear she will ever be led into temptation."

However, his smile was suavity itself as he turned it upon her.

"It's a lovely day, isn't it?" said he.

"Is it?" returned Miss MacGillicuddy, with an uncompromising glance.

Constantia, who was now very nervous, burst out laughing.

"One can see that for oneself," she said. She grew frightened when she heard her own laugh ring out—not so much of her aunt as because of her; one never knew, indeed, what she was going to say next. She was beginning to hope that the earth would open and swallow her up quickly, when again the door was thrown open and "Mr. Featherston" was announced.

CHAPTER IV.

SHOWING HOW EARNESTLY A GOOD YOUNG MAN FOUGHT THE INTEMPERATE FIEND; AND HOW CONSTANTIA OPENLY REBELLED; AND HOW THE ENTRANCE OF A THIRD VISITOR OCCASIONED SOME SMALL GOSSIP.

He came in, in the slow, dignified manner that belonged to him. His face was cadaverous; his inches many. He was rather Italian in type, and his eyes were black and plaintive. He was delicately reserved in his demeanour, and there was a suspicion of hauteur in the way he wore his eye-glass. Old Lady Varley, now dead, used to say he "carried himself so well;" and certainly his figure was good, and he was never in a hurry. He had a very kindly opinion of his own merits, which is an excellent thing if one wants to get on in the world. Not that Mr. Featherston wanted to get on. He was only thirty-two, and the richest man in the county.

Miss MacGillicuddy received him with as near an approach to civility as she knew. He shook hands with everybody in the silent way that belonged to him, and that somehow helped him to the consideration with which he was always treated; and then looked cautiously round him, as if to know where he should sit. This slow glance made everybody feel, somehow, how poorly furnished the drawing-room was, and how squalid it must appear to him after his own luxurious home. Finally he seated himself next to Constantia. This quite hemmed her in. Barry was on her left, he on her right, Miss MacGillicuddy before her, the window behind. It gave her the feeling, somehow, that there was no escape.

She was very glad, however, that Featherston had come in. His entrance, for one thing, had broken up the rude speech that she felt was on her aunt's lips, and for another——. She blushed softly as she found Mr. Featherston's glass bearing down upon her.

"So glad," he said, looking at Constantia but speaking to her aunt, "that your—our mission, rather, is going on so prosperously."

Miss MacGillicuddy drew herself up. She grew self-important, and was evidently pleased. Constantia looked indifferent because she knew to what Featherston was referring; but Barry, who knew nothing, stared. All at once it dawned upon him that the Blue Ribbon movement was in question, and that Featherston was making hay while the sun shone, by pretending an interest in it to Miss MacGillicuddy. He had adopted the new temperance fad as a means towards getting into her good graces, and from hers to Constantia's. This discovery filled the heart of the Limerick man with rage. Not towards Featherston—he was too honest-hearted for that—but towards himself, in that the simple device had not first suggested itself to him.

“Why the jeuce didn't I think of it?” he demanded of himself, with fine contempt.

“Yes, it prospers,” said Miss MacGillicuddy, in the deep voice that had struck terror into so many hearts. She looked pompous, and gave herself the airs of a high priestess. “Yesterday I made several converts. Three new names by my endeavours were enrolled upon our list.”

“Three! Your energy is indeed marvellous,” said Mr. Featherston. “It surpasses that of most.” He pulled his moustache meditatively, and shifted his glass from one eye to the other. “And these new people?” he asked.

“Mrs. Duffy, of Tan-yard Lane, was the first whom I convinced.”

“Duffy—Duffy?” questioned Featherston, putting his forefinger to his brow with an appearance of deep thought.

“You know her,” explained Constantia softly. “She is the old widow who lives near the church, and who subsists principally on the three shillings a week allowed her from the charity fund.”

This sorrowful bit of information was, I regret to say, beer and skittles to Mr. Barry. He was glad to his heart's core that the first recruit had proved so poor a one—to a widow, subsisting on charity, the temptation to drink must be small. It would, there-

fore, be impossible to Featherston to make much out of it. He laughed aloud in the exuberance of his joy, forgetful of the impression he was making on Miss MacGillicuddy.

"No great difficulty in stopping that old lady's grog," he said, still laughing gaily. "Not much of it to be got out of three shillings a week!"

Silence followed this rash remark; Featherston coughed gently, and then Miss MacGillicuddy, as though waking slowly from an unpleasant dream, turned her head towards the culprit, and fixed him with a baleful eye. It unhinged Mr. Barry directly, and put an instantaneous termination to his mirth.

"Not only your opinions, but you yourself, Mr. Barry," she said slowly, "are strange to me. I feel no embarrassment, therefore, in telling you that if you come here to scoff and jeer at what I believe to be a righteous work, I shall ask you to——"

"Scoff—jeer!" interrupted Barry, with great presence of mind, now quite alive to the danger of the situation. "My dear Miss MacGillicuddy, how can you so misjudge me? True, I am in a sense a stranger to you, but that is a misfortune I hope every day of my life to combat." He cast a glance at Constantia, who refused to see it. "As to my opinions, I feel convinced they are yours. You accuse me of treating this new mission with disrespect. On the contrary, I regard it as a benefaction to my country, and a most requisite thing in these benighted days when the land is laid waste with rapine and murder, and when, no doubt, lawlessness is fed by the spirituous liquors you so wisely condemn."

He felt very nearly as eloquent as an Irish Member when he had got thus far, and stopped short, delighted with his outburst. Mr. Featherston, who had regarded him all through with a calm, judicial eye, now made a suggestion to him.

"I had no idea you felt so strongly on the subject," he said. "I am very pleased to hear you so express yourself, my dear Barry. You will then join us? We may add your name to our list?"

He drew out a little book from his breast-pocket

as he spoke, and with pencil in hand looked inquiringly at Barry. His countenance was smooth and immovable, and Barry, as he looked back at him, felt that the murder he had spoken of with such horror a moment since would not be altogether without its charm on certain occasions.

"Yes, sir. We hope you, too, will give us your voice in this matter. You seem well able to plead the cause," put in Miss MacGillicuddy grimly. She waited, with her gaze fixed upon him, for his answer.

Mr. Featherston's eyes sparkled. This troublesome rival was now, he thanked himself, in a dilemma from which he would find it difficult to extricate himself. There, however, he wronged Barry, who was not so dull, in spite of his proneness to laughter, that he could not see his way out of most things. He bent a deferential glance on Miss MacGillicuddy.

"Madam," said he, with his best manner and his strongest brogue, "if you will be the one to instruct me, I'll be only too glad to learn from you the rules to which I should subscribe were I to join this commendable society. Day by day I shall be only too happy to come here to you, to sit at your feet and learn." Again his gaze wandered to Constantia, and told her this last speech was meant for her. "I have no doubt at all but that I shall be one with you shortly. Still, it is a serious matter, and I think a lady of your ability would only despise one who would rashly enter into a compact without having duly weighed the pros and cons of the affair."

"Right," declared Miss MacGillicuddy, with an approving snort.

Featherston subsided into his chair with an angry sniff; and Barry scored one.

Miss MacGillicuddy returned to her first point, and went on.

"The other names upon my list," she said, "are John Byrne and Michael Walsh."

"Ah! Men!" exclaimed Featherston, growing gently animated once more. "As a rule I feel more gratitude when the converts are of my own sex. One

rejoices more over the reclamation of a man than a woman ! ”

“ Ungallant ! ” said Constantia, with a swift smile that made her lovely.

“ No, no, I assure you. ” He seemed to lose himself for a moment in that wondrous smile, and then recovering himself went on quickly : “ They are more prone to error. ” He took his eyes reluctantly from Constantia, and again gave his undivided attention to her aunt. “ These men ; I should like to have a talk with them, ” he said. “ You can give me their addresses ? ”

A dull red flamed into Miss MacGillicuddy’s cheeks. She grew confused. Constantia, graceless, laughed aloud.

“ One of the men is ten years of age, ” she said ; “ the other, eight. ” She folded her hands upon her lap, and valiantly refrained from looking at Barry, who was choking with joy in the background. “ Their reformation is a subject for public rejoicing. ”

Miss MacGillicuddy cast a withering glance at her. She would probably have broken into unparliamentary language, but that Featherston came to the rescue.

“ To begin young, is to begin well, ” he said gravely and cleverly. His tone was slow and impressive, but not goody-goody ; he had carefully avoided that. It would be impossible to either sneer or laugh at him. His aristocratic bearing was so greatly in his favour, that one could not help congratulating the society that had gained him as an advocate. He was looking full at Constantia now, as though challenging her to attribute to him that vilest of all sins, hypocrisy. There was, however, no suspicion in the face she uplifted to his. It was evident that she believed in *him*, if she did not altogether believe in his doctrine. She had subdued her amusement, and was quite calm again.

“ I hope we have you on our side, ” said Featherston.

She shook her head, but said nothing.

“ Constantia will join us, ” said Miss MacGillicuddy decisively.

“ No, I think not, ” contradicted Constantia quietly

"Constantia will join us," repeated her aunt, exactly as if she had not heard the clear, distinct voice.

"I shall not, indeed," returned the girl coldly. She was afraid of her aunt when her anger was directed against her friends; for herself, she was never afraid.

"But why?" demanded Featherston, speaking very gently. "Why will you not give us the—the happiness of knowing you are one with us in heart?"

His eyes were handsome, and just now spoke volumes. He laid a certain stress upon the words happiness and heart. Constantia flushed softly, and her eyes fell before his.

"I dislike extreme measures," she said. "I dislike the touch of affectation in the matter. I object to the pharisaical way in which the mission is conducted. The blue ribbon is, in my opinion, a mistake. Parade is death to anything that should be long-lived."

"Hear! hear!" cried Mr. Barry, forgetting himself for the second time. Miss MacGillicuddy half rose from her seat. She was evidently about to launch into bitter invectives when once again Featherston intervened.

"There is much truth in what your niece has said," he murmured softly; "but I think if she will go a little deeper into our real meaning, she will see the use of the ribbon to which she now so—so vigorously objects. In the rush and bustle of life people are only too prone to forget, unless things are perpetually held up before their eyes. We hold up to them the blue ribbon to remind them always of the great work in which we would have them join. We would eradicate everywhere the fatal weed—intemperance. The love of drink, like money, might justly be termed the root of all evil."

He looked very earnest, very distinguished. Constantia admired him heartily. It was strange he should have taken up such a mission, and should be devoting himself to it so nobly. It was very praiseworthy. He was rich, well-born, with all the world at his feet, as it were, yet here he was giving his time and his

energies to a work that at all events he hoped would be of service to his kind, but that could hardly be expected to make a name for him. She wondered if the Earl of Killeens knew of the interest he was taking in this ribbon movement. It was probable he did, as Featherston sometimes stayed at the Castle, and Lord Killeens was so interested in the progress of any temperance work, that it was only natural they should have talked together on the subject. Constantia remembered that Featherston was anxious to stand for the county at the next election. If so, Killeens might be of service to him, as he could command half the Protestant part of the county, at all events. She hoped he would give his voice to Featherston. Probably Featherston hoped so too.

His last speech had raised a curious expression on Barry's face, who now addressed him directly.

"You mean us to understand that you yourself, then, never touch anything?" he said, leaning forward. "Champagne—beer—nothing?"

His tone was sharp.

"Nothing," returned Featherston, with a pleasant smile.

He did not try to improve on the simplicity of his answer. He left it so.

"I had no idea you were a teetotaller," continued Barry rather pointedly.

"What an objectionable word that is!" said Featherston, still smiling, but lifting his shoulders in a faintly deprecatory manner. "I hardly know why it should be so, but it always strikes me as being in a degree—shall we say—er—vulgar. A teetotaller, as you put it, my dear fellow, I certainly was not, a year ago, but as an example to my tenantry I became one. It is really," with a little wave of the hand, "no self-denial; and the effect is good!"

"Deuced good!" said Mr. Barry, with barely-restrained animosity as he marked the "effect" upon the elder Miss MacGillicuddy, who was plainly ready to worship Featherston as a modern saint.

"As for the tenantry," said that spinster with much acrimony, "and their class generally, it is almost

impossible to get at them. Mr. Evans—he is very active, you know—he labours heavily amongst them; and yesterday he came to me almost in despair. He came to me, I might say,” Miss MacGillicuddy corrected herself with a solemn air, “in a violent temper. It was the first time I had ever seen him even irritated, so that I took note of it.”

“The labourer is worthy of his ire,” put in Mr. Barry mildly. Constantia, fortunately, was the only one who heard this remark.

“They had treated him, he said, with the greatest disrespect. From what I could learn, many of the occupants of the cabins into which he had entered had been distinctly abusive. One old woman, who had been just partaking of the pernicious whisky, threw the bottle at him. Another flung the cat. His coat was much bespattered, and his hat was stove in. He told me the last house he went to, the owner of it advised him to go home and *sleep it off*! I confess I hardly wondered at that, his appearance was so very much against him. Poor man! I told him he had my sincere sympathy, but it didn’t seem to do him any good. What hurt him most, of course, was the accusation of drunkenness.”

“I should have supposed it would have been the cat,” said Constantia.

“D’you know,” said Barry—this he pronounced like Juno—“that it’s my opinion, if he goes on in his present line for very much longer, they’ll break not only his hat but his head. For an Irishman it would be risky; for an Englishman——” He shrugged his shoulders expressively. “They hate being preached to, outside their chapel, and just now the very sight of a gentleman and a Protestant is obnoxious to them. If you want to keep Mr. Evans still on your visiting list, my dear madam, I should strongly advise you to advise him to keep himself quiet.”

“A martyr’s death makes a noble end,” replied Miss MacGillicuddy gloomily. As she was not the one to endure it, she spoke with great courage.

At this moment two figures went past the window,

and the sound of two voices wafted inwards to the drawing-room. One was high, shrill, voluble, and eminently youthful; the other was deep and manly. Almost directly afterwards Mr. Stronge was announced.

He came in, with Norah at his heels.

He was a man of about thirty-four, who looked fully his age, but no more. There was nothing very particular that could be said of him—nothing decided. A description of him should perforce be a rather negative one. He was not very tall, and not very short; not very stout, not very thin; not very ugly, and certainly not very handsome. Two things about him, so far as surface knowledge went, were alone positive. His eyes, a dark luminous gray, were so beautiful that they would have redeemed a plainer face. They were undeniably attractive, earnest, and fulfilled with honesty and that greatest of all beauty—loving-kindness. He was rich, too—there was no doubt about that; rich enough to come under the head of a modern Croesus. That his father made these riches by means of trade was, perhaps, a drawback in the eyes of the county families round, who, though for the most part poor, could count their ten and twelve generations.

The elder Miss MacGillicuddy received him with a certain reservation. She was not accustomed to hold these *levées*, and her mind misgave her that Constantia had something to do with it. Three men in her house, and all at once! She cast a searching glance at her niece, who was looking wonderfully meek as she murmured a commonplace word or two of welcome to Mr. Stronge. To him, however, had she known it, these simple words were not commonplace at all; they were, on the contrary, a very accumulation of all sweetness and light.

Miss MacGillicuddy pondered. Could they all be here because of that graceless girl? Could even two of them? Featherston she acquitted; he came for the good cause. But the others? Barry, of course, was fool enough for anything; but could a sensible man like Mr. Stronge be so carried away

by the wiles of a silly creature like Constantia, as to spend his time dancing attendance upon her? No; it was impossible. And yet——

She was civil enough to Stronge, however, in spite of her lingering suspicion. He was not, indeed, a man to whom it would be easy to be rude. To Garrett Barry she showed her rough edge without hesitation, and even to Featherston she could betray impatience, but Stronge was of very different stuff to either of these. He was a man of no birth, yet his face was full of a gentle dignity as restraining as the bluest blood could produce—a dignity that rendered it very difficult for any one to offer him an offensive word.

Miss MacGillicuddy sat then in silence meditating on many things, and feeling slightly baffled, when her gaze fell on the luckless Nora. How did that child come here? How did she dare to defy the rules laid down, that forbid the entrance into the drawing-room of muddy boots?

“What brings you here, Norah?” she demanded sharply.

“She came with me,” answered Mr. Stronge quickly, scenting mischief in the breeze. He took the child’s hand in his, and feeling it tremble slightly, tightened his grasp on it, and drew her close to him with a very kindly smile. “I met her in one of the fields as I came towards the house, and she most considerately turned with me and bore me company, and entertained me most delightfully by the way. She has indeed been very kind to me,” said Mr. Stronge, turning to the little, thin child beside him and laughing to her, not at her, which latter is a thing that all children hate.

“I have repeatedly told her that she is not to come into this room with her boots in the muddy state in which I now see them,” went on Miss MacGillicuddy, transfixing the child with a stony stare.

“They are muddy, certainly,” said Mr. Stronge, glancing down at the thick little boots heavy with soil that adorned Norah’s feet. “But I assure you

that that too is my fault. I am not very well accustomed to the country, and as we came to a boggy place, next to the river, I slipped, and should probably have fallen in but for Miss Norah. She came valiantly to my rescue; in fact, it is possible that she saved my life! But she got her boots muddy." He smiled again at Norah (who had forgotten her fear in a wild desire for laughter that could not be indulged), and again pressed her slim, bony little fingers in his own big clasp.

"H'm!" responded Miss MacGillicuddy drily, as if she could have said more, and she would.

Conversation then became general. In the course of it Mr. Stronge, who was an agreeably sociable sort of person, said:

"I was up just now at Ballymore. I went to call upon Mrs. Dundas, who is quite an old acquaintance of mine."

He did not say friend, and Constantia noticed it.

"She seems to be quite the old acquaintance of everybody," said Miss MacGillicuddy, with a sniff.

"Her coming amongst us will, I have no doubt, be a great acquisition," put in Featherston, who had seen and admired Mrs. Dundas.

"I suppose so," replied Stronge. There was, however, in spite of the acquiescence, a lack of enthusiasm in his tone.

"She is remarkably handsome," went on Featherston, who had brightened a bit.

"Is she? As a girl she was remarkably plain," said Miss MacGillicuddy; "a thin, awkward creature, with flaming hair, and no manners."

"Yes, I remember her," exclaimed Barry, laughing; "she was ordinary, certainly, and her clothes used to hang on her as loose as bags. Yet now she is beautiful. I was never so astounded in my life as when I saw her yesterday. And yet, somehow, her beauty, in my opinion, is—er—unpleasant. She would strike me as being——"

"Subtle?" suggested Mr. Stronge.

Constantia shot a sudden glance at him. *Was Donna subtle?*

"What do you think of her?" asked Featherston, addressing her suddenly. He had marked the change on her face.

"She is my cousin," returned she simply. She was glad she had this to say, as it saved her having to answer his question; but her words wrought consternation amongst them.

"Yes, she is closely connected with us," said Miss MacGillicuddy, in her graveyard voice, "though for many years we have lost sight of her. We believed, indeed, she had quite dropped out of our lives, when this sudden marriage with Mr. Dundas brought her back not only to Ireland, but to the very part of it where she had passed much of her earlier life. It is a good match, I hear, in many respects. We all thought she would have married Lord Varley, but doubtless this John Dundas, from what I hear, is the better man for her, as he is more likely to keep her in order—and that she would require. A curb, a curb, for Donna! As for Varley, he is a man of no character whatsoever."

To this sweeping comment no one made reply.

"By-the-bye, Lady Varley is giving a dance on the seventeenth," said Stronge presently, looking at Constantia. "You will be there?"

"Yes." She smiled at him as she answered, and Stronge coloured beneath that touch of sunshine as a boy in his teens might have done.

"Varley is away, and it is uncertain whether he will be back for it. Mrs. Dundas gave me to understand that Lady Varley was very doubtful about it. A cousin of mine is to arrive on the seventeenth. I hope he will be in time, at all events."

"A cousin of yours?" asked Constantia, with some eagerness. A new-comer was an event in Carmeen.

"Carew O'Grady. You must have heard me mention him, I think. He has been abroad for years. He was at one time an attaché at Constantinople, and for the last year or two has been travelling in the East. He has come home, however, and I have asked him to stay with me for as long as suits him."

As he spoke, he put on the little touch of pomposity

that always broke out when he was alluding to anything that touched his family pride.

"He is in reality The O'Grady," he said, "the head of that family, but he prefers the ordinary prefix to his name. I think you will like him." He was addressing Constantia. He seemed anxious to interest her in this cousin. Constantia was pleased half unconsciously at this mark of his regard, and as she usually did when her eyes met his, she blushed delicately.

The blush was not lost on Andrew Stronge.

CHAPTER V.

SHOWING HOW MEMORY, BE IT SWEET OR BITTER, TRIUMPHS
OVER MOST THINGS.

THE seventeenth came in due course, and with it Lady Varley's ball. It was already so far advanced as to enable one to declare it a success. There was a superabundance of flowers, excellent music, and a floor beyond praise. There were almost as many men as there were women, which in the country means everything, being a rare occurrence.

Mrs. Dundas arrived late. She always arrived late as a rule, perhaps thinking it a pity to waste her entry on an empty room, as she was generally the best dressed, and quite as generally the loveliest woman wherever she went. Having taken this fact to heart early in life, she moulded her plans to suit her knowledge. To-night, being a stranger, she would have been sure of much attention had she been plain and dowdily attired; as it was, she created a perfect furore.

And, indeed, she was well worth a lengthened examination. Her gown was white satin, her ornaments diamonds; but one hardly noticed all this, as her face caught the eye. She looked superb, sparkling,

brilliant. There was a touch of expectancy, too, about her that heightened her animation.

As she let her plush cloak drop from her into the arms of the attendant in the dressing-room, and as her whole exquisite figure betrayed itself to her in an opposite mirror, she smiled to herself complacently, and her blood ran quicker through her veins, and her eyes grew brighter with the sense of coming and sure triumph.

It was in one of the dainty rooms off the ball-room that she stood, a little later on, looking round her. She was listening, with parted lips that smiled enchantingly, to the man beside her; but her glance was straying delicately here and there from one form to another. At last it rested.

If she started, it was so slightly that her companion knew nothing of it. The pupils of her eyes enlarged, and though she still spoke to and smiled at him beside her, her glance did not again wander. It was fixed on a corner of the room in which she stood, where a man of about thirty, distinguished, if rather dissipated in appearance, was leaning against the wall, conversing with a fair-haired woman sitting on a lounge below him.

She was a very ordinary woman, an every-day person—a nobody, in fact, as Mrs. Dundas decided after the first cursory glance; but he——

She bent her large, full gaze upon his bowed face, and waited. Perhaps there was some magic in the concentration of her regard, because after a very little while he grew restless, absent, troubled, as it were, and at last lifted his head and stared impatiently around him. He appeared to Mrs. Dundas bored, weary, dissatisfied, and this belief did her good; it added new fuel to the life within her.

His eyes travelled slowly, as if against his will, up the room and down again, ever nearer and nearer to where Donna stood in all the insolence of a beauty that could hardly be surpassed; nearer, nearer still, as though the magnetic fire in hers was compelling him to seek her.

At last he saw her. She was still smiling, with her

beautiful head thrown a little backward. She noticed the quick indrawing of the breath, the pallor that overspread his features upon his recognition of her, and—she noticed, too, how he withdrew his gaze, and bent it with redoubled eagerness upon the woman near him. She saw all, and laughed to herself, and watched again patiently for what she knew would come. A sense of amusement stirred her, as she noted his evident determination to escape her, his resolve not to look again.

A soft colour began to burn in her cheeks, her fingers tightened on her fan, she threw all her will into the steady look she directed towards him. The battle had begun, and she *would* be victor. As she watched, she could see that he grew even more assiduous in his attentions to his companion; he threw all his energy into his conversation, he said something to her, and laughed aloud as he said it. He seemed very near victory, when all at once he gave in, and raised himself, and with a beaten but a passionately glad glance, looked straight at Donna.

It was a strange, long look, a miserably hungry look, as of one long denied, and now at last to be satisfied; it dwelt upon her beautiful, *débonnaire* face in a speechless sorrow that was yet exultant, for there was in it the memory, full and complete, of a wild, mad, happy past.

Mrs. Dundas drew her breath quickly, and her teeth came down sharply on her still smiling lips. The smile died, indeed, and she seemed on the point of giving way to some emotion when she conquered herself by a supreme effort, and forced herself to return his gaze. As she did so a divine light shot from her eyes. She leaned a little forwards, she made a faint movement with her fan. He came to her.

He was beside her now, and her partner of a moment since having somehow faded away, they were virtually alone. Three years floated from them as though they had never been, and Venice, and moonlight, and a love that then had appeared endless, and even now seemed strong as death (at least to him), was all that was left them.

She was the first to recover herself. "So you did come back," she said mockingly, yet with a latent tenderness. Her lips took a half-scornful curve. He knew then that she had read his departure on her arrival, his hesitation about returning for this dance where he knew he should see her, his final craving to see her that drove him homeward, all aright. Something reckless within him that was always there, made him rejoice in that she knew, for the moment; later on, when her presence was withdrawn from him, he felt a sense of shame.

Just now he had no thought for anything but those old days in which she had reigned queen. He was slower to emancipate himself from such memories than she was, perhaps because they clung to him with a greater persistency.

"You are changed," he said at last.

She shook her head.

"It is only that you have forgotten," she said, knowing well that forgetfulness had not been with him. She had never removed her eyes from his since that first time when she saw him leaning against the wall, and now the swift warm blood rushed into her cheeks and lit her eyes and made her beautiful. Varley seemed to find a difficulty in removing his gaze from her face.

"Forgetfulness is what you should wish me; it is not what you can accuse me of," he said, in a low tone.

He spoke strangely; it was evident that he was battling with some powerful emotion. His dark eyes burned into hers. He had forgotten that there were people in the room, and that he was still holding her hand. She, who never forgot, remembered this, and noted his agitation, and, lifting her head, laughed softly. She moved her hand with a tremulous coquetry within his, as though to remind him of it.

"Would you hold me thus for ever?" she asked.

The words were simple, the tone full of meaning. Varley caught it, as she intended he should, and some fire shot into the dull despair of his eyes. She checked it as it was born.

"Forgetful you are, indeed, in spite of your pro-

testation," she said. "It seems to me that you have forgotten that there is any one in the world beyond you and me." She indicated by a swift glance from under her long lashes the other occupants of the room, one or two of whom were regarding them curiously.

"Yes, I had forgotten," said Varley. He dropped her hand.

"It is very warm here; is there no cooler place? This is your house, yet you must remember I am a stranger in it," said Donna. Her beautiful bosom rose and fell with a quick sigh.

"Come," returned Varley unsteadily.

She went with him out of that room, across a minor hall, and into a dimly-lit fernery beyond. The drip, drip, of water fell pleasantly upon the ear, and the tender notes of the music, coming to them from the distant ball-room, sounded sad, remote, and plaintive.

Donna sank upon a cushioned lounge, but Varley remained standing. The faint light from the coloured lamps shone like drops of blood upon her satin gown, and threw many glittering rays into the diamond stars that lit her rich red hair.

"There was a reproach in that last speech of yours," he said presently, standing over her. "A stranger in my house! That is true; but by whose fault?"

"Was it mine?" said she. "Would it be wisdom to deny it? After all, was I not always in fault? And yet——" She paused, then looked full at him: "In what hot haste you were to wed!"

"My wedding broke no hearts," retorted he bitterly.

"I was too frivolous for you," said she. "I hear you went from the ridiculous to the sublime. Lady Varley has been described to me as a saint—not a mediæval one, however, the gods be praised! I have seen her, and her clothes hang pretty well."

"I hope you and Lady Varley will be friends," returned he in a studiously careful tone, which was, however, thrown away upon her.

"Don't be a hypocrite," she said, calmly but shortly.

At this moment Lady Varley appeared at the entrance to the fernery, came in, and passed through it to a door at the other end. In passing she looked at Mrs. Dundas, smiled graciously and inclined her head. Donna, who had followed her movements in silence, turned to Varley as the door closed on her.

"You see, old adages come true," she said. "Talk of an angel—we were talking of her just then. To think that you—you—should have married such an one!"

"To think that you should have married John Dundas!"

"You have me there, I confess. But there was nothing else left to me. My uncle was dead; you were gone; I was penniless."

He moved abruptly, and paced once or twice up and down the narrow space between them.

"You could have written," he said.

"Too late! You were married to your saint. Why should I disturb your beatitude? I abstained from troubling you, and later on I received my reward in——"

"In what?" eagerly.

"John Dundas! Every one tells me he is quite perfect. And we have always been taught that what every one says must be right. So you see"—with a sudden outburst of gaiety—"if you have your saint, I, too, have mine. I am as good as you any day. You can't outshine me. A word in your ear, however." She leaned forward and whispered to him. "Don't you find the sanctity rather trying?" she said. "Deadly dull, eh?"

He laughed in spite of himself, and taking up one of her little gloved hands, beat it lightly against his own palm once or twice.

"A truce to all such heretical sentiments," he said.

"Which, after all, only means that you agree with me, but have not the courage of your opinions. Do you know, Frederic——" she stopped abruptly. "Frederic," she said again, as though wondering at the sound of the word, and then: "how it recalls

everything!" she said. "You recollect? You were Fred to me then, and sometimes—in fun—I used to call you my *Friedrich d'or*."

"Don't!" said he sharply.

"It touches you still?" She spoke as if surprised. "And yet it is a long time ago." She sighed quickly, heavily, and then smiled. "I shouldn't have thought you would ever be the one to take anything *au grand sérieux*," she said; "more especially so ordinary a thing as an affair of the heart."

"You have outlived it, then?"

"I have outlived most things. I have seen more trouble than most."

"It has not left its marks upon you," said he bitterly. He looked with angry admiration at the fair, serene face before him, without line, or mar, or scar, or any of grief's disfigurements.

"Do you regret that? Would you have me bent and bowed with sorrow's burden? Am I not better as I am?" She seemed a little amused. "What a blood-thirsty person you are!" she said. "I believe you would have me, if you could, crushed out of all remembrance. But when one comes to think of it, I don't believe I am a person easily crushed. I have endured a good deal, and yet I live."

"What have you endured?" said he scornfully.

"John Dundas, for one thing," returned she, with an irrepressible laugh.

"I hear he is kindness itself to you," said Varley gravely. He was in the humour to quarrel with any one, even with her—most of all with himself.

"For once gossip speaks true," replied she, unabashed. "Did you hope he was unkind? What a face, Varley—so cold, so reproving! If you were somebody else it might have its effect, but as it is—I confess it only wearies me."

She yawned behind her fan, and rose slowly to her feet.

"You will return to the ball-room?" asked he reluctantly, in spite of his ill-temper, as she noticed.

"To dance? No. I am sick of dancing. Oh

for some new sensation—something to lift one out of the slow death of boredom that these days breed!”

As she spoke, she threw back her head languidly, and stretched out her lovely, naked arms rather towards him, then suddenly dropped them with a wicked little laugh.

“No, not that,” she said, warning him back with a light gesture. “But cards, dice. You remember Monaco and the old nights?”

“A needless question. I have already told you that my misfortune is that I cannot forget.” His voice was strained, his face pale. He was evidently intoxicated by her beauty, and the memory of past delights that still held him, because—fatal thought—there might yet be warmth enough in them to bring them back to life!

Donna watching him, read him easily, and leaning against the silken curtain behind her, laughed in her triumph, in that strange, noiseless fashion that she had. He was hers now at this moment, as he was hers then in the past days, as he would be hers for ever—so long (she understood him well) as her beauty lasted. And that would be till youth was over. Afterwards what signified anything? After that, the deluge.

“There was at least no fear of stagnation in them,” she said, alluding to those “old nights,” that had their fascination for her still. “You recollect how we used to play, you and I together, and our luck? It grew to be proverbial. Why was it?”

“Who can say? You spoke a while since of old adages. Hear another: ‘Lucky in play, unlucky in love.’ We were lucky in play”

“It was the only luck we knew,” said she. “Then we were together; now we are as apart as the poles.” Then suddenly her whole air changed. She turned her eyes quickly upon his. “But *are* we?” she asked in a whisper that was only a breath. She had drawn nearer to him. He put out his hand, and pressed her back from him.

“Take care!” he said, in a dangerous tone.

"Take care what you are doing, you may go too far! Has nothing changed you? These two interminable years? Your marriage?"

Her white-fringed lids fell half-way over her eyes, and she laughed contemptuously.

"Pouf!" she said; "if she has taught you morality in so short a time, I confess I think her clever. If you have it, keep it, Varley; don't waste it upon me. You were sadly in want of it yourself when I first knew you, so now you have acquired it, let me beseech you not to squander it."

Here, her ill-temper being over a thing as light as herself, she flung it from her and laughed gaily, and threw at him a handful of snowy scented blossoms.

"Don't scold me," she whispered, with a mischievous pretence at penitence that had its charm, and heightened every beauty she possessed; "I'll be very good for the future. I won't do it any more, if you will only——" She made a deliberate pause; and then with an exquisite pout of her red lips, and an inclination towards him: "If you will only kiss and be friends." A second later she was laughing gaily. "No, no!" she cried. "I did not mean it—of *course* not. Though after all it would not be the first time. But if they knew it, what would my old boy and your stately saint say? Fred!" Contrition smiled within her eyes. "So long as my hands are idle, I warn you I shall work mischief. Is there nothing to be done? No card-room in this house? Not even a bagatelle-board?"

"There is a billiard-room, and a card-room also," said Varley rather absently.

"No! you don't say so! And here have I been all these hours wasting my precious time. You have degenerated, Fred; once you would not have been so dead to the desires of a pretty woman. And I *am* that, eh?"

"Go on. What is it you want?" asked Varley, refusing to look at her.

"To handle once more an ace of trumps; to feel myself victor on one field if not on another. I doubt I am growing old and ugly; my empire in Cupid's

camp is past ; and I would therefore lord it over the card-table, if kindly chance permit."

He laughed grimly

"Are you tired of conquest?" he said. "Satiated at last! That must be a new experience for you. Card-tables—yes, of course, there is a room somewhere, where all the old fogies, the fathers and mothers of the rustic maidens, are now assembled."

"So much the better. I am not so dead to *les convenances*, that I cannot see the use of old fogies. I shall be chaperoned, countenanced by them. A quiet little loo will suit me down to the ground, and I leave it to you to make up the table. As for our stakes, the fogies need know nothing of them."

"They will wonder at your absence from the ball-room."

"On the contrary, they will regard me as a steady and sedate young matron, who very properly has turned her back upon such frivolities as dancing."

"You would have to be born again before they would believe all that."

"Not a bit of it. And if the frivolity business won't do, why, let us say I am delicate, and that much dancing might make me mad."

As she said this she smiled saucily, yet with a put-on languid air that was admirable.

"I'll make you up a table if you like," said Varley "There is Barry, he likes a game; and Featherston, he will probably demur on principle at high stakes, but there won't be any trouble with him. And there is Colonel Blood, and his wife. I don't know that *she* would run to much, but——"

"She will do—as a sup to Mrs. Grundy; and if she has even a smallest touch of the fire, I can trust myself to raise it to a flame. To tell you the truth," said she, with a sincerer touch of reality than she had yet shown, "if I am to live here at all, I must have something to keep me going. Otherwise there will be mischief."

"And your husband; he will not object?"

"He is not by any means a stupid man," said she,

CHAPTER VI.

SHOWING HOW HE MADE A VERY SINGULAR MISTAKE, AND
HOW SHE ENLIGHTENED HIM.

MIDNIGHT had struck when a young man crossed the hall of Araglin, and looked somewhat vaguely round him. It was late to arrive anywhere, and of course there was no one to welcome him, or put him *au fait* with his surroundings. He wandered rather aimlessly through the salon on his left, and, avoiding the ball-room, which was unmistakable because of the fiddling, went for a quiet little nook of a place that appeared to him to be empty of everything human, and a prey only to flowers and a dripping fountain. It was badly lit, and he was quite into it before he discovered that humanity after all had a place there—a humanity remote from himself.

A slender form clothed in lace was bending over a cactus. The amorous plant had seized her dainty robe, and was holding it fast in spite of all the owner's efforts to release it. O'Grady went forward, and addressed himself to her.

"Perhaps I can set you free," he said. "Let me at least try. A cactus is such a hurtful thing, and you are wounding your fingers!"

"If you think you can," she said; she lifted her head and looked at him. She was slightly flushed, and there was something in her expression that, even at that early hour of their acquaintance, caught and held him. "I have been very awkward, but——"

She paused, and O'Grady, stooping over her, strove with the prickly plant for mastery. Eventually he gained. She stood released, and gave him as his reward a lovely smile. It parted her lips, and shone in her lustrous eyes.

"I am indeed indebted to you," she said courteously. She regarded him very thoughtfully for a few moments. "I do not think I saw you before this evening," she remarked at last in a gentle, gracious tone.

O'Grady smiled. It was surely a singular speech for a girl to make to an utter stranger, but as said by her it pleased him, and besides, she struck him as being altogether unlike the ordinary run of people.

"That is true," he told her. "I arrived quite late. I meant to be here yesterday if possible—that is, at my cousin Featherston's place—but I found it impossible to get here until to-night; an hour ago, in fact. The last train brought me, so you can imagine what little time I had to hurry into my clothes and get here. To tell you the truth," here he laughed involuntarily, and lowered his voice to a confidential tone, "knowing nothing of my hostess, I had no great desire to get here at all, but Featherston was imperative; and now that I am here," with a lingering glance at her, "I am more than glad I came."

His companion blushed vividly, and an expression he failed to understand widened her eyes. Was it surprise, perplexity? And if so, why?

"Your cousin lives at the Grange, I think," she said at last.

"Yes. You know him, perhaps? I have been in Egypt for the past year or more, and on my return to England was quite glad to receive an invitation from him to my native shore. It seemed to me—sick of arid plains—an excellent thing to come down here and thoroughly vegetate for a bit. I am Irish, of course, my name is guarantee for that, but I had not seen the distressful country for many a year. It has left itself open to comment, beyond doubt—to abuse, perhaps; but," with an irrepressible glance at her, "it certainly has its compensations."

Again that curious look flitted across her face.

"Truly it is an unhappy land," she said. Her tone was colder this time, and she regarded him with what might be almost termed distrust. This distressed him, though he hardly then understood why, or what it was that had befallen him; he only felt that he could not remove his eyes from the face before him. Its calmness, its purity, the extreme beauty of its gentleness, touched his very soul. And there was a sadness about it, too, that enhanced rather than detracted

from its charm. He was astonished at his admiration, but not displeased; yet it *did* occur to him as strange that he should have travelled over half the known globe, only to return to his starting-point to find the one woman at whose feet he would choose to lay his heart.

All this was vague to him as yet; but still he knew—vaguely too, indeed—that his fate was sitting there near him, grave, and a little cold, perhaps, but only as he would have her. Who was she—this calm, still girl?

“You are not dancing,” she said presently; “you say you came late, and perhaps——”

“So absurdly late, that it is of no use, I imagine, to think of partners. Unless, indeed—of course, I know no one. I did not even present myself to Lady Varley—a rudeness, certainly, but one that I dare say she will condone, when she knows at what an unearthly hour I put in an appearance—that is, if, indeed, she ever hears of me at all.”

At this she started, and looked towards him as if to speak, when some one passing by her, laid a hand lightly on her shoulder. It was a large, distinguished-looking woman, at the generous side of forty.

“You here, Yolande?” exclaimed she, smiling. “You are a wraith—a veritable spirit. I was positive I saw you in the supper-room a moment since, and yet now——”

“Perhaps you did; to-night I am ubiquitous.” The new-comer laughed and went on, but O’Grady hardly noticed her departure.

Yolande! How the name suited her! Surely it was made for the pale, statuesque creature beside him; could any other so well befit the clear, soft eyes, the open brow, the pure, sweet lips? Yolande! No high-born *châtelaine* of olden days could have shown a haughtier profile, a serener smile, a glance more kind, or more replete with gentle dignity.

When her friend had gone by, she turned to him.

“You were saying——” she began, and then hesitated as if in doubt how to proceed.

“I was saying how I had omitted to present

myself to my hostess," supplied he gaily; "an omission I have no doubt she will appreciate. Poor woman, I expect it was a kindness to relieve her of so much of her duty."

"You think," said she, looking downwards at the fan she was idly swaying to and fro, "that Lady Varley is one who would willingly evade a duty?"

"I am not thinking of her at all," declared he, laughing. "Why should I? Strangers we are, strangers we shall probably remain. She knows as little of me as I do of her."

"As little, indeed," said she slowly. She rose to her feet. "But let me tell you——"

"Ah! if you are a friend of hers," exclaimed he, rising too, and speaking with a sudden accession of earnestness, "tell her from me, that though I have not had the pleasure of being made known to her, that when I had only been half-an-hour in her house, I knew a greater happiness than I had ever before experienced."

"Sir," said she very gently, "I am Lady Varley!"

CHAPTER VII.

SHOWING HOW MR. STRONGE STARTED ON A WILD-GOOSE CHASE.

It was about this time that the greatest difficulty of his life was experienced by Mr. Stronge. This was to keep away from The Cottage, as Miss MacGillicuddy's very unpretentious residence was called. There was something in it—literally *in* it—that attracted him to an extraordinary degree. His own place, Inchirone, was situated about five miles from it; yet there was scarcely a morning that Mr. Stronge did not discover some special business that led him past the modest gate behind which dwelt Constantia.

At times he felt jealous of Featherston, in that the grounds of his place actually adjoined and touched

the desired paradise that held her, and where he would be. This was before he had waked to the fact that he had reason to be jealous of Featherston on stronger grounds. The latter, too, was an old friend, whereas Stronge was quite a new one; and besides the nearness of land, Featherston was near enough in acquaintanceship to call on Constantia every day, had it so pleased him. That it did not so please him was an everlasting wonder to Stronge, though certainly a great comfort. He himself had not the hardihood to present himself except on settled occasions. He had told himself that once in every ten days was all he could afford himself in the way of visits; and though he often longed to transgress this rule, and frequently stopped on his daily walk or drive past the gate to argue the matter out with himself, and persuade his better judgment that he *might* enter, still prudence, and a natural modesty that sat very admirably upon him, always won the day. He was an honest lover, and never denied to himself for a moment that he loved Constantia with all his large and kindly heart; but just as honestly he acknowledged to himself those defects of his that might easily render him undesirable in the eyes of a young girl. His years (he was fully thirty-four and she was eighteen); his parentage, which was a thing of naught; his face, which was not handsome (to put it kindly); and his large figure, which was very loosely knit; all these were bad, but it was the blankets that crushed him. He felt they damaged his cause more than all the rest. The county was kindly, and had received him graciously enough, and yet he knew those blankets were a trial to it, and that Constantia, whose blood was old and famous, would necessarily look down upon a man whose grandfather was nowhere, and whose money had been gained by trade. Yet, though he dwelt upon all this a good deal more than it was worth—still he hoped.

To-day—having absented himself, with a courage that was Spartan, from The Cottage for the orthodox nine days—he felt he might call there without being

regarded with coldness, or snubbed as a too persistent visitor. It was a fine May afternoon, and as he walked up the steps and knocked at the hall-door, the *extreme* beauty of the hour, the season, entered into him. The lilacs were all abloom, their perfume filled the air, and the music of the small glad birds rang sweetly from bough to bough. Rippling streams sang in the distance, and a cloudless sky lay over all. Stronge felt his heart uplifted, and a sense of youth, of joy, took possession of him. Suddenly, too, it seemed to him that there *must* be hope in the future.

The door was opened presently by the demure Minnie, who wore, besides a jubilant air—that sat very much at home upon her pretty peasant face—a new and remarkably smart cap. It was trimmed with cherry-coloured ribbons, and was of a most abnormally small size.

“Miss MacGillicuddy is not in, sir,” she said, in answer to his question. “She is off to Dubling, but Miss Connie and Miss Norah’s at home. Come in, sir; they an’ the young gentlemen is in the garden up to some game or another. They’ll be raal plazed to see ye, for there hasn’t been a sowl near the place all the mornin’ ”

Minnie was talkative, and she liked Stronge, as did most people who knew him. In her opinion “he was a raal fine gentleman, though maybe a thrifle too ould for Miss Connie, an’ not a patch on Misther Barry, who was the divil all out for fun.”

Stronge went into the shabby little drawing-room to wait for Constantia, feeling almost as glad as Minnie herself that Miss MacGillicuddy was in Dublin. That meant absence from The Cottage for a day or two at all events, perhaps for a week. Would it be possible for him to call at her house during her absence, with, say, an ostensible message for the boys? A gift, an invitation to go shooting. Shooting what, though? Why, rabbits: all boys liked shooting rabbits. George, the eldest MacGillicuddy, was now at home, and he had no gun. He, Stronge, might make him a present of one. There was that breech-loader he got the other day, and didn’t exactly want. After

all, what on earth had he got it for? In all probability he would never use it, he much preferred the two old ones to which he was accustomed; and—yes—George might as well have it. It would be a most natural gift for a boy to receive from a man of his years. Of his years! He checked himself here with a little start, and a pang of regret. Of his years! and Constantia was exactly two years older than “the boy.” He put this reflection away hurriedly, and went back to his first thought. To be able to call upon her (she had been “her” for a long time now), even for a moment or two, every day for a week; to be able to see her once in every twenty-four hours. It seemed too good to be true. He was so wrapt up in his blissful dreaming, that it was with a quick start he turned from the open window near which he was standing, and which was only a foot from the ground outside, as the door of the drawing-room was flung violently open. He glanced towards it expectantly, and then something—some one—dashed past him, cleared the window-sill, and was gone like a flash of lightning round the corner.

It was a little flying figure with silken hair streaming wildly in the wind. It was Norah; her eyes blazing with excitement, and evidently in mad fear, to judge by the rapidity with which she ran. She had literally flown past him! “Oh! Mr. Stronge,” she had gasped, and that was all. In another instant she was out of sight.

“What had happened? Had the old woman returned unexpectedly, and was she now pursuing her? Was there murder in the air? Where was Constantia?”

Mr. Stronge had just begun to form some plans for the staying of Miss MacGillicuddy’s vengeance, when once more the sound of hurrying footsteps caught his ear.

Again the door was thrown wide, and in rushed the rest of the MacGillicuddys *en masse*. First the collegian, then Constantia, then the two younger boys. They all made for the window; they all went through it, all save Constantia. She paused with one

foot on the sill to cry aloud to him in a breathless way.

"Come on. Come on. She'll be round the corner, and if she once gets to the wood we'll never catch her. I can't stay. Come on. Come with us."

"For what? What has she done?" cried Mr. Stronge, roused out of his customary calm by all these terrible, successive shocks. What on earth had that wretched Norah done now? Would they lynch her? Who could tell what these wild Irish children might or might not do? He stared in bewilderment at Constantia. Was this lovely, brilliant-eyed, eager creature, the sedate girl who had sat in this room with Miss MacGillicuddy some days ago with her work in her hands, and her head down-bent, and her voice low and toned?

"You'll lose it all," cried the "brilliant creature" now, with an impatient stamp of her foot.

"Lose what—the lynching?" Mr. Stronge had not been many months in Ireland, and was still in much doubt about the inhabitants.

"It is rude to leave you, I know, but go I must. I've set my heart on catching her, and there never was a hare like Norah."

Dawn broke upon Stronge. A hare? Hare and hounds, of course! All this extraordinary excitement, then, was about nothing greater than a game—a simple game—an *old* game. He remembered it well. The very sound of it brought back his youthful hours. Once more he saw himself as he was when he was considerably slimmer, scudding across country with a whole school of fellows at his heels. It was absurd; but as this picture grew before his mental eye, his heart began to beat vigorously. Could he fall in and hunt the flying Norah? Should he—he, with his years, his—his size? It would be undignified, of course, and yet—

"What are you waiting for?" cried Miss MacGillicuddy, indignantly this time. "Are you coming, or are you not? Can't you *run*?"

There was scorn in her glance. She did not even seek to disguise it. Stronge grew miserable. Yes;

that was it. She had touched the point of points. Ought he at his age to run, like an irresponsible schoolboy? Memory, which is generally hateful, reminded him on the instant of the gray hair he had discovered when brushing his head that morning, and of the shock the discovery had given him. A man with gray hair to go racing all over the place with a set of lunatic children! And yet, to run—to run with Constantia! He looked at her. The scar was still upon her lips, and she had taken a step forward that meant a continuance of her flight. He saw, understood, hesitated, and was lost.

In another instant he had sprung after her through the low window, and was running as if for his very life.

“Follow me; I know a short cut. We’ll catch them up this way,” panted Constantia.

And follow her he did: into the yard, over the ducks, through the geese, who knew him at once as an intruder, and raised an unholy row over him, and made vicious dabs at his legs; past them, and into a whole flock of turkeys, who gave way only to precipitate him into a pecking household, where infants ruled the day. The hens and their chicks scrambled to their feet in awful wrath. The little, tiny, yellow, fluffy things chirped loudly, and their mothers rose at him. In a body they advanced. He flew past them; he scattered the bantams that delight in war, but nearly came to grief over a huge sow, who, with her family, was asleep in an angle of the yard, all her lovely babes slumbering round her.

All these delights he left behind him, and, still following wildly in Constantia’s footsteps, found himself presently in the orchard, toiling at breakneck speed up a stiff little hill that rose in the centre of it, and was decorated on either side by flowering apple-trees—not the modern espaliers, but good, old-fashioned, moss-covered trees, gnarled, and highly respectable, and, indeed, of very ancient lineage.

The hill, though short, was steep. Mr. Stronge went bravely up it, though panting and puffing in a rather alarming degree; but Constantia took it like a

young deer. At the top of it they overtook the others, still in full cry, and rushed with them through a wooden gateway into a small wood beyond, made sweet with shadows and cool winds, and in all ways desirable as a retreat from the burning rays of the young spring sun.

But if Mr. Stronge had imagined he was to be allowed to breathe here, he was much mistaken. Now, he and Constantia were completely mixed up with the others, and he was swept onward through the grateful shade into the burning open beyond.

At this instant a wild shout arose from the leading MacGillicuddy boy. He pointed frantically with his hand, and there, far away, at the very end of the long field that stretches to their left, a fragile little figure in a short white frock and with golden floating tresses can be seen, still in good wind apparently, and making for a gap that will give her a chance of doubling on her pursuers.

A stiff embankment bounded this field, with a heavy fall on the other side of it—a treacherous fall, as it was impossible to judge of it from the wooded side. To the MacGillicuddys it was evidently an old friend, as they all made for it in a body, cleared it like so many birds, and were scouring away down the field before you could say “Jack Robinson.” Not so Mr. Stronge! Essaying to emulate them, he found his wings were clipped by time, and, missing his mark, caught his foot in a malicious bit of bindweed, and rolled comfortably on to his face and hands.

Not hurt, however! He was up again in an instant, satisfied himself that Constantia had not been a witness of his downfall, and was presently tearing along again at a gallant pace. Age, dignity, dread of ridicule—all were forgotten; he knew only that he was eagerly bent on catching that little, slim, flying form at the end of the field. Not for years had such a sense of thorough enjoyment warmed his blood; he felt young again! Pooh! he *was* young. What signified a gray hair or two, or his thirty-five years? Other men of thirty-five were only boys; he would be a boy, too. He scouted the notion that he was

considerably out of breath, and, indeed, put on such a fresh and gallant spurt that in a minute he had caught up Jimmy and actually passed him—passed a lad of twelve! "*To triumphe! Viva! Hurrah! Tallyho!*" he shouted to himself in his glee, and was so far carried on by his delicious enthusiasm that presently he passed the other boy, and came up with George and Constantia, who had circumvented the wretched little hare, and now were pursuing with hands outstretched to grasp, so near was the prey.

"You! you!" cried Constantia, as Stronge joined with her. Evidently she was both surprised and delighted with his prowess.

They were on the outskirts of a rabbit warren by this time, and it was easy to see that Norah's race was run. George made a plunge forward and caught her by the arm; in doing so, he got his foot into a burrow, and over he and she went. Constantia tripped, too, and so did Stronge, in his eagerness to seize the luckless quarry. The two small boys in the rear followed suit, catching their feet in a hole likewise; and indeed over they all went.

They were on their feet again in an instant, the captured Norah in their midst.

"Ha! ha! ha!" roared Mr. Stronge, still full of the glad excitement that had held him all through this memorable pursuit.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Constantia in concert, George joining in. The two younger boys fairly chuckled in their joy; and even the poor hare, dead beat as she was, gave way to wild merriment in gasps and sighs.

"It was mean!" panted she at last, pointing the finger of scorn at Mr. Stronge. The child was so thin that her finger was like a claw, but there was a world of meaning in it; and when one is physically exhausted, action costs less than speech. "Horribly mean! To press a stranger into the hunt! Oh!"

Words failed her.

"A stranger, Miss Norah! Am I always to be that?" demanded Stronge reproachfully.

Norah grinned, and slipped her arm within his.

"Never mind; you are a real duck," said she.

There was an absence of *mauvaise honte* about Norah, very refreshing in an artificial age. Mr. Stronge laughed again, and gave the friendly little paw a tuck that brought it closer to his side.

Constantia, who had been laughing all the time, now drew her breath sharply, and laid her hand upon her heart.

"This running is a terrible thing," said she, "when one is growing old. Such a pain as I have here! It is a lesson to me; I shall run no more." They all gave way to mirth again at this, being still unsatisfied with laughter; and Constantia, still with her hand upon her heart, looked at Stronge. "Do you ever have a pain here?" said she.

His face changed a little as a touch of his everyday experience came back to him through the glamour of this one sweet hour of holiday-making. In *his* heart—a pain?

"An eternal one," he said quickly, giving himself no time for thought. Indeed, he spoke in a moment of impulse—an impulse that fired his eyes and made him younger, so long as it lasted, than even the chance race had made him.

Constantia must have seen something in his glance, though it was very gentle, if extremely earnest, to disconcert her, because she coloured deeply and let her eyes fall upon the sward at her feet.

"I say!" said Norah presently, in a healthy tone, "let us all come home. I'm starving."

"Yes," seconded Jimmy, "let's try to squeeze a cup of tea and some hot cake out of Mulcahy."

They were terrible children!

Norah grew a little red, and Mr. Stronge saw it and hesitated about accompanying them. Jimmy, who had long yellow hair and blue eyes, and who was, by a freak of Nature, a regular Norseman, though nothing but Irish blood ran in his veins, noticed the pause he made, and instantly grew clamorous for his society.

"Oh, yes, please do come," said Constantia then, with a little smile that covered the secret fear in her

heart that Mulcahy might not have the kettle boiling, and that Minnie in all probability was off to the next bawn where her sweetheart lived. With a sinking heart she remembered the coquettish look of the morning's cap with its cherry-coloured ribbons! Even if Mulcahy is in a good temper, and has the kettle boiling and consents to make the tea, and—nervous reflection—has not partaken of her “thimbleful,” who is to bring the tea into the faded drawing-room if Minnie is away with her young man?

She was lost in a labyrinth of miserable doubts, when a word or two falling from the lips of Norah brought her back with a jerk to the present.

“Aunt Bridget is gone to Dublin. Didn't you hear? Didn't Minnie tell you? Minnie was so awfully glad, because Aunt Bridget thinks sweethearts wicked things, and she won't let Minnie speak to hers. She wouldn't let one of us speak to you, if *you* were a sweetheart. So mind you don't be one.”

“I shall remember,” said Mr. Stronge, with an attempt at a smile; but his heart sank.

“Well, Aunt Bridget is gone, any way for a week—a whole week.”

“So Minnie may kiss her sweetheart,” broke in Jimmy. “I saw them the other evening behind the haystack, and——”

“Jimmy!” said Constantia, in a tone that reduced him to silence, though he never knew why. Constantia might not have been so severe had her mind not been disturbed. Norah, however, who was only subdued by Aunt Bridget, went on triumphantly:

“Yes, sweethearts will be allowed now for a whole week. Seven days, mind you. Such a lot! You may be a sweetheart too, if you like. Aunt Bridget is gone away, and we are all happy. Oh! and there's something else,” she paused breathlessly, and squeezed his arm, and looked up at him out of wild, guileless blue eyes. “When the cat's away you know, the mice may play. *We* are going to play—we are going to give a *party*.” She broke into gay laughter at the very extravagance of the thought.

George laughed, too.

"Norah's molehills," he said. "Donna Dundas is coming to afternoon tea on Thursday, and that's her party."

"Yes, it is Donna," said Norah, hooking herself on to Mr. Stronge's arm, and smiling up at him. She had the most endearing smile—Constantia's in miniature, and less charming because more profuse. "We're a little troubled of course, because we don't quite know what to give her, or what she would like, she has lived so long abroad."

What further confidences is this dreadful child going to make? Constantia looks daggers at her, but fails to catch her eye.

"Garlic," said George.

"Nonsense!" interrupted Constantia, who was now very red. She did not mean to invite Mr. Stronge to meet Donna, and it seemed so dreadfully inhospitable to be discussing the little insignificant affair with him, when he was not to be one of the party. Altogether, this afternoon in perspective has proved a source of much annoyance. Donna for one thing had invited herself, partly with a mischievous longing to do what Miss MacGillicuddy would certainly never have permitted had she been at home, partly for other reasons. To entertain her properly was causing Constantia many troubled moments; the resources of The Cottage being limited, and Mulcahy decidedly on the spree now that her mistress was away.

Somebody of course should be asked to meet Donna, and Constantia had thought of Garrett Barry, because nobody could be made uncomfortable by Garrett, and he was never silent, or dull, or at a loss for anything to say. And there was the doctor's young wife, Mrs. Blake; she was a chatty little thing too, and well born, and nice in every way; and neither she nor Garrett would think or look as if they thought it odd, if anything went astray with the domestic arrangements.

It seemed quite a tremendous undertaking for Constantia, this simple cup of tea, so unaccustomed was she to receive any guest within the walls of The

Cottage. She would have liked to ask a good many people, of course: Mr. Stronge, for example, and—and Standish Featherston, but her courage failed her. And, besides, if her aunt should hear of it?

Here George broke into the conversation with a genial air.

"You'll come, won't you?" he said. "Thursday, mind. Mulcahy will, in all human probability, be *non compos*; but that won't signify once you are up to her little ways, and you can help us to entertain Donna, whilst we are struggling with her and the tea-pot in the lower regions. Can't he, Con?"

Constantia grew pale. But she smiled bravely.

"Yes, I hope you will come, Mr. Stronge," she said. "Four o'clock; and——" She stopped because she didn't quite know what else it was she could say.

Stronge looked at her, and read her correctly. He saw all the nervous shyness that was consuming her; he saw, too, the little thoroughbred air with which she had bidden him to her house—surely against her will! He was on the point of declining her invitation, when a revulsion of feeling set in. What! was he always to be regarded by her as a stranger—as one apart? No, he would break down the barrier!

"Thank you; I shall be very glad indeed," he said.

CHAPTER VIII.

SHOWING HOW GRIEF LAY EMBEDDED IN A GENTLE BREAST;
AND HOW A RANK WEED BEGAN TO FLOURISH IN
CARMEEN.

It was not until quite an hour after O'Grady had parted from her, that he entirely understood the greatness of the shock Lady Varley's announcement had given him. The girl, so frank, so naïve, with whom he had been so inexpressibly charmed, had been taken from him in that moment, and a woman

married, his hostess, given him in her place. It was almost absurd the strength of the desolation that fell on him as he realised this. Of course, however, it explained everything. He had wondered at, whilst admiring, the calm self-possession with which she—a young girl as he had deemed her, a neophyte in the battle of life—had accepted his assistance at first, and afterwards seated herself, and invited him to share her lounge with an open forgetfulness or disregard of that law of society that dwells on formal introductions between those hitherto unknown to each other.

But Lady Varley!—he was her guest. *That* she thought of only, and that it was her duty to be gracious to him, and delicately friendly. She had dismissed him with a little bow before he had quite recovered from his surprise, and he had presently found himself in the card-room looking for Featherston, who, with Mrs. Dundas and a few others, was deep in the delights of a loo that had very little limit to speak of. After a while, that seemed to him, however, short, so engrossed was he with his own thoughts and recollections, he induced his serious cousin (Featherston seldom looked so serious, or good, or irreproachable, as when engaged in some light transaction that fraternised but poorly with his righteous protestations) to quit the card-room—or Mrs. Dundas. He was unsuro as to where the loadstone lay, being new to the country, and unaware of the existence of Constantia MacGillicuddy, who indeed had an attraction for Featherston that did not, however, interfere with his amusing himself in other quarters as occasion arose.

O'Grady found the long drive home full of a mystical beauty. His thoughts had, perhaps, a good deal to do with the forming of it. It was a lovely night, bordering on dawn, and their way ran through roads wooded on either side, and with a starry heaven above. It was just paling then! The stars were in their death-throes, and all their wondrous green and gold and crimson tints flashed out now and again in brighter flashes, as though with a last effort to defy the hastening dissolution. It was coming fast.

Already there was a touch of defeat in the pale, opal line of light that stole majestically upwards from behind the distant hills, and shed a faint, vague radiance down their sides.

O'Grady was, for once in his life, half-blind to Nature's grand effects. He looked on the coming dawn with eyes as blind, or nearly so, as the respectable Featherston who sat beside him, and who seldom troubled himself with anything emotional. O'Grady was angry with himself because he could not treat his accidental meeting with Lady Varley as a jest, a thing to laugh over with his cousin. But he could not! And—was it a jest? There was no element of amusement in it after all, when one analysed it. It was a mere nothing. He had met a woman whom he felt he could have loved, and had only discovered when too late that——

Pshaw! what he meant, was that he had discovered that she was "wooded, an' married, an' a'" That was all. It was the merest trifle out of the tale of one's life, a matter of ten minutes or so.

It was rather a bore, however, the way in which the whole scene clung to him; he could not shake it off, though he would gladly have done so. It was only a question of time, of course; and in a day or two he promised himself he would have so far forgotten the episode that he would have to jog his memory, before he could bring to mind whether Lady Varley's hair was black, or brown, or red; or if her eyes were——

They rose before him then. Great, strange, sad, yearning eyes, that seemed to reproach him for his determination to obliterate them from his memory. Nay, they seemed to defy him to do it! He saw her again, as she bent above the cactus, and raised those earnest eyes up to his, and thanked him softly for his welcome help.

There was a dignity about her, that just then had seemed to him not only pretty, but amusing, in one so young. He had misunderstood all through! Even now, as he fought with himself for his persistent recurrence to that vision of her he had conjured up, he did not understand. He did not realise that his

first admission was the true one; that it was indeed "too late" for retraction or forgetfulness, because he loved her.

All the next day he scarcely thought of her, but on the second he grew restless. He told himself that the tranquillity of the life in this almost deserted village, with its four or five desirable families, was unsuited to him after the rush and the turmoil that had attended on his wanderings hither and thither, and the excitements to be found in camp life, and the ceaseless changes to be found in the gorgeous transformations of an Eastern existence. It was all too tame here, too prosaic; yet it did not suggest itself to him as a thing to be desired that he should quit the dull stage on which he found himself.

On the fourth day he permitted an idea, that up to that he had kept scrupulously in check, to start into life and grow. It was to the effect that courtesy compelled him to go to Araglin and once again apologise to Lady Varley for the mistake he had made. He had muttered something at the moment, of course, but something decidedly insufficient. If—his brow grew dark red as this fear suggested itself—if, by any possibility, she had grown to believe he knew who she was all the time! Yes, he must go, he must see her at all risks. He did not wait to calculate about the risks, or to remember who was to bear them.

Featherston had started off somewhere after breakfast, "to interview one of the tenants," he said; in reality to sun himself in Constantia's smiles for an hour or so, loitering with her through the growing verdure, and letting his vanity be flattered by her shy glance and the soft blush that every now and then mantled in her cheeks. Featherston, therefore, was disposed of, and the day was his own to deal with as he would.

He determined on walking to Araglin, though it was six miles away; but a tramp through the awakening woods could not be otherwise than pleasant, and would probably be a rich treat. He was accustomed to walking; indeed, an idle day's dallying for him would have been a severe day's march for those

around him, and six miles was a mere flea-bite in the way of fatigue. He felt he should enjoy even so small a walk after being cooped up for so many days.

And he did enjoy it, though his thoughts were in a measure too preoccupied to permit of his inhaling to the full the charm of the opening buds, the thick richness of the springing mosses, and the beauty of the dense warm masses of wild flowerets that thronged his path and died beneath his tread. The starry prim-roses smiled at him from their green beds, the blue-bells nodded their scented heads, the rich and trailing honeysuckle flung its flowery ropes across the branches that swayed above his head.

He reached Araglin at last, and entered it, not by the wide entrance-gate open to all, but by a side-gate that led on to the lawn in a more direct way. This he knew, by certain questions and answers that had passed between him and his cousin Featherston.

He went through a little bit of dense underwood, and so into a side-walk. Before him lay the lawn, and on his right a gravelled path, where, as he looked, he could see a figure moving slowly and with care.

It was Lady Varley.

He turned at once in her direction, and as the laurels gave way he saw her more directly. She was clad in a straight, black gown, that reached to the ground, without flounce or frill of any sort, and with something delicate in white about the long, back-turned cuffs and deep collar that caught the eye at once. He could not, of course, know that these delicacies were of the choicest Mechlin.

Something was in her arms. A little bundle, all white cambric and lace, that showed clear against her black gown. A baby!

It was a very tiny bundle (though it had seen six months of our sad and troubled life), and she held it close-pressed against her heart, as though it was so much one with her that she could never let it go. She was bending over it, looking, no doubt, into the wee face that was all the world to her, and was, therefore, so unaware of O'Grady's coming that he could study her without impertinence.

At first, seeing her with the child in her arms, he felt a sudden shock. He had forgotten his ideal was married, but now circumstances compelled him to remember that misfortune. He watched her as she came towards him, and bit by bit the beauty he had at first acknowledged grew stronger to him, and drew him with a fatal force to her.

She was looking at the little thing she held so tightly in her arms, and her face was fair with the sweet flush of motherhood. There was something of the divine in her expression. Her whole soul seemed wrapt in the fragile creature that she held; an almost passionate love lit her dove-like eyes as she gazed on it; she appeared to have no thought beyond the little mite that lay so quiescent, so terribly quiescent, upon her breast.

O'Grady came forward into the fuller light. A staid nurse, who was walking beside Lady Varley, dropped now obsequiously into the background, and O'Grady advanced quickly.

Lady Varley, seeing him, greeted him with a smile. It was the gentlest smile in the world, and full of graciousness. O'Grady, encouraged by it, came up to her, and pressed the hand she gave him. The baby was lying upon her left arm as calm as it, unfortunately, always was.

"I thought," said O'Grady, "that I would come up to-day and tell you (I had no time then, had I?) how I regretted the many absurd things I said to you, not knowing——"

"As for that," said she; she burst out laughing, carefully, as should a married woman, yet merrily as a girl—"it was very strange, was it not?" she said. "But, of course, you could not know! When I told Lord Varley of it, he said it was a pity I had ever enlightened you. And, perhaps, yes; but when I heard you were to stay in our neighbourhood I knew you would have found out, no matter whether I spoke or were silent."

"Yes; it didn't matter at all," said O'Grady. He was looking into her pure, beautiful eyes, and as he looked, he felt that nothing mattered, only that she

was lost to him. He struggled with himself, and regained presently his composure. "Yet I am glad you spoke," he said.

"So am I," returned she graciously; "otherwise you would not have known who I was, and," with a gentle smile, "I should not be indebted to you for this visit."

She spoke without looking at him, so that she was ignorant of the expression that had grown within his eyes. She herself had her gaze concentrated upon the baby lying against her breast. It was a beautiful little creature of about six months, but very white, and with wonderfully large eyes; they seemed to O'Grady to look through him. It occurred to him that it was an extremely old child for its apparent age, but, at the same time, an extremely small one. He would, of course, have thought nothing at all about it had he not heard from some one that Lady Varley's baby was six months old.

"This is my little daughter," said she now, in a tone quite different from anything he had ever heard before; there was a subdued but terrible passion of tenderness in it. She threw back the silken covering round it to let him more closely view her treasure. "You think?" she questioned vaguely, yet with her eyes upon him as though waiting for something.

"She's charmingly pretty," said O'Grady, with much presence of mind, stooping as he spoke over the little frail blossom. It was, perhaps, the happiest thing he could have said—save one.

"And—and healthy too, eh?" said she, still with her eyes on his. They widened as she gazed, and a suspicion of nervous terror grew within them.

"And healthy too, of course," responded he, laughing, though in truth laughter was far from him. Then something, perhaps the innate truthfulness within him, compelled him to add with a depreciatory shake of the head: "Not that I am a judge."

"An excellent one," declared she quickly. "You agree with our doctor here. He says baby is strong, *very* strong; and—and that she will be stronger every day."

It occurred to O'Grady at this moment that "our doctor here" must be either a most unskilful practitioner or else a skilled hypocrite. Perhaps he was a coward! Well, such cowardice could be understood! He was looking at Lady Varley as all this ran through his mind, and he noticed the quick flush that had grown upon her face.

"Surely she is too heavy for you," he said impulsively.

His suggestion delighted her, poor soul! She looked with fond, devouring eyes upon the child, and hugged it closer. For a full minute she did not speak, her eyes being riveted upon the marvellously quiet baby in her arms.

"It is true," she said then, turning upon him a glance full of eager gratitude. "She is heavy, though it did not occur to me before. Yes, she tires me, really dreadfully at times."

She smiled at O'Grady; she seemed suddenly to grow full of an unspeakable gladness. Poor mother! With a wild longing she clung to each frail thread of hope held out to her. Her child, her *all*, must be strong and rich in life; must thrive, and flourish, and bloom by-and-by into gracious girlhood. All this she set her heart upon, whilst the tiny object of her soul's desire lay pale and languishing upon her heart.

May God have pity upon all such mothers!

"Just now," went on Lady Varley, taking courage to express a fear, because of the encouragement he had unwittingly given her, "she is not looking her best. We think," smiling up at O'Grady, who was a tall man, with an expression full of the heavenliest confidence, "she is teething; that is what makes her so pale. You think her pale?" anxiously.

The child was ghastly.

"That would explain it, of course," said O'Grady, who began to believe himself a very fiend of dissimulation. But with that wistful face upturned to his!

"You hear, nurse!" cried Lady Varley, whose breath was coming a little quicker; "Mr. O'Grady sees nothing strange in baby's pallor. It is only what we think."

"Yes, my lady," said the nurse, in a low tone. She was a comely, kindly, homely woman; and O'Grady thought that as she spoke there was a certain reserve in her manner.

It may be that the child heard her voice; at all events she made a feeble movement in her mother's arms, struggled violently for a second or two, and then fell back as if exhausted. Lady Varley grew very white.

"It is nothing, my lady—nothing," exclaimed the nurse, who seemed to O'Grady to be extremely attached to her mistress and very anxious. She took the now motionless baby from her arms, and held it against her own breast, rocking it softly to and fro. Two tears welled from her eyes, and fell slowly down her cheeks. Lady Varley saw them.

"Why do you cry?" she demanded almost savagely.

"How can I say, my lady? For my own child, perhaps—who is dead."

"Dead! How dare you talk of death?" cried Lady Varley, growing livid. Then her passion died from her. "Poor soul, poor soul!" she murmured faintly, "what an awful grief is yours! How terrible is the vainness of your tears! To lose—to lose all!"

She lifted one hand to her heart, and sighed heavily. She looked as if she was going to faint; but anxiety for the child, from whom her gaze never wandered, kept her alive.

"I dare say, as you have told me, it is only her teeth," said O'Grady hurriedly. "This village doctor of whom you speak, he may not be very efficient. Is there no other?"

"Yes; there is Doctor Griffin." She mentioned a Dublin physician whose skill with children's diseases was not to be questioned. "He has been here before to see baby. Last week he was here. But it is only teething, I assure you; only that," cried she, with a sharpness full of despair.

"Nevertheless, send for him again," said O'Grady remorselessly.

The nurse had moved towards the house with the

child ; Lady Varley, as if transfixed, stood staring after her. It was on O'Grady's tongue to bid her adieu, and entreat her to follow the woman and gain the haven where she would be—beside her child—when a sound of voices, a gay laugh struck upon her ear and his, and compelled them both to glance instinctively in the direction from which the sounds came.

A moment later Mrs. Dundas, escorted by Lord Varley, turned the corner and was almost within touch of them.

Just so long as one might draw a heavy breath there was silence, then :

"Ah, so glad!" exclaimed Donna, rustling towards Lady Varley with extended hands and a beaming smile. The smile was excellently well got up, and yet there was something about it that struck O'Grady as being forced. Was she "so glad" to find Lady Varley in this secluded walk, where it might reasonably be supposed that no one would be found?

The sun was shining right upon her head, and her hair looked like threads of gold. Her marvellous complexion—that was one of nature's purest efforts, and owed nothing to art—suggested itself to O'Grady, just then, as being the most beautiful thing of its kind he had ever seen. He had not time farther to consider her, as Lord Varley was at his elbow, and was saying something civil to him.

Meantime, Mrs. Dundas had broken into quite a fluent little speech for Yolande's benefit.

"I met Lord Varley on the avenue," she said, "and when I found you were not indoors, I determined on storming this part of your grounds. It occurred to me, happily, that there might be a distant chance of finding you here. I hope," with a gay laugh, and a flutter of her long lashes, and a side glance that indicated O'Grady, "I have not been indiscreet! But I wanted so badly to see you, and consult with you about our 'Young Men's Christian Association' meetings."

"Am I one of your young men?" asked Varley, laughing, who had caught her last words, but not the

beginning of her speech. He spoke in a general way, of course, as if including his wife in his question, but he cast a swift, amused glance at Donna, who, however (being wise in her way), declined to have anything to do with it.

Lady Varley smiled faintly.

"Are you ever indiscreet?" she said, and paused.

Mrs. Dundas turned her eyes quickly upon her, as if startled, and desirous of reading her real meaning; she moved, too, as if she would have spoken, but Lady Varley went on again in the same low, even tone.

"As for the meetings," she said, "I shall be very glad, of course, to help in any way. That sort of thing, no doubt, is useful—at all events, for a month or two—while it is fresh."

Her manner was dispirited; and, as though feeling this, and regretting the cold and disheartening effect it might have on a truly good work, she drew herself up quickly, and forced a smile to her pale lips.

"I hope the work will be a success," she said. "To help young men to a better, a higher idea of life, to a purer standard of thought and action—what work can be nobler? Yes, I am glad you came to consult me." She strove to throw off the mantle of grief that was enveloping her. "It was fortunate you thought of seeking me here, or perhaps I should have missed seeing you."

She said this *à propos* of Mrs. Dundas's remark that she came purposely to this walk to find her.

Lord Varley, who had been listening, answered her.

"It was the merest chance," he said. "It was, as I thought, the last place in the world to dream of finding you. I thought you were in the village, and impressed that fact upon Mrs. Dundas."

Donna did not change colour. She turned her expressive eyes upon a tall lily growing near, as if lost in admiration of it, until the first supreme moment or two was past, and then she turned them upon Varley, and shot a glance at him that should have slain—a little lightning affair that Lord Varley did not see, but that O'Grady did.

Lady Varley was looking at her husband. After a pause, during which you might have counted twenty, she said very gently:

"You mistake, Frederic. Mrs. Dundas knew I should be here. She tells me that is why she came."

Her manner and expression were so calm that O'Grady was for a while deceived by it. Mrs. Dundas was not. She perfectly understood the meaning of Lady Varley's words, and did not forgive her for it. She—Lady Varley—had, in a sense, been ungenerous, but only because she would not submit to the thought that any woman (even the lovely, lawless thing before her) *could* be her rival in the esteem of her husband. "Well, she should see," thought Donna, with all the vicious anger of a bad woman towards a good one; and if she chose to ignore the truth, so much the easier and the quicker would the end come that should convince the haughty woman of her—Donna's—power.

O'Grady rushed into the breach with a pleasant commonplace, and conversation was tossed lightly to and fro for ten or fifteen minutes.

Mrs. Dundas was particularly brilliant. She was introduced to O'Grady, and quite dazzled him with her beauty and her *espièglerie*. She, indeed, devoted herself to him for the short time they were together—only a quarter of an hour altogether, yet long enough to betray to O'Grady (who had seen and studied many men in his time) that Lord Varley grew restless as her smiles waxed kinder.

Lady Varley, on the contrary, seemed preoccupied.

Presently, a break occurring in the conversation, Varley turned to Mrs. Dundas, and said something to her about the conservatories. She hesitated for a moment, and then declared her desire to see them.

"All the county talks of them," she said, smiling at Lady Varley; and then: "You will come?"

"If you could excuse me," replied Lady Varley with extreme quietude. "I am not very well to-day, and it is quite a walk there and back. Lord Varley will show them to you, and—afterwards I hope you will let me give you a cup of tea?"

Her smile was irreproachable, if something languid. Donna murmured a word or two, to the effect that she feared if the walk was so long, there would be no time left her for the cup of tea.

"Ah!" said Lady Varley. "The country is yet strange to you, but I think you will find there is more time in it than anywhere else, for—everything."

Mrs. Dundas refrained from answering this. She only bowed her head in a light parting salutation that suggested to the onlookers that the parting would probably be but a momentary affair (though she had no intention whatsoever of returning for that cup of tea, which would so certainly be insipid), and moved away with Varley in search of the flowers.

They had gone about a yard or two, when Lady Varley roused herself with an effort, and called to her husband.

"Frederic," she said quickly, yet without any undue haste, "a word before you go—I am sure Mrs. Dundas will excuse me. Baby is not so well to-day," she paled as she said this. "You will be passing the house on your way to the conservatories, will you go into the library for a moment and telegraph to Doctor Griffin to come down to-morrow? I would do it myself, but—it will not take you a moment," she said.

"What is the matter with her this time?" asked Varley. There was some amusement and some impatience in his tone. Lady Varley shrank beneath it.

"It is her teeth—only her teeth," she said softly, yet with a haste that was suggestive of an anguish—an ever present dread—that she was perpetually but ineffectually striving to force into the background. "Still, I am uneasy."

Varley laughed good-humouredly; so did Donna. She was a childless woman.

"When are you not?" said Varley, still openly amused. "And telegraph for Griffin again? She is an expensive little animal, isn't she?"

He spoke carelessly. One could see at a glance that he cared little for the expense of bringing down from town, twice in the same week, a physician so skilled in infantile diseases that his fame was on the

lips of all; but his tone was without feeling for the tiny, weakly creature for whom the great man was needed. It stung to the very soul the mother, whose every hope was in it. She flushed from cheek to brow—a flush that faded almost as it was born into a deadly pallor. Was she thinking then, as her passion died, if it were now indeed possible for money to buy that frail, sweet life in which all hers was centred? This was the cruel fear she kept in abeyance; but sometimes it conquered her—as now.

Of one thing O'Grady became assured as he watched her; that she loved the child better than the father! This explained the yearning in her eyes, the sorrowful curve of her lips. Fear for the child—for her only consolation!

When she spoke, however, it was calmly, and without a suspicion of reproach. She seemed to pass over everything. "You will telegraph?" she asked, looking at Varley.

"When I have shown Mrs. Dundas the houses," returned he lightly. Then with a laughing allusion to the child, "I dare say she will survive until then." His manner was not ill-natured; he could not see how his wife paled before that word "survive," because his eyes were on Donna.

"Oh, no," cried the latter prettily, "you must telegraph at once—at once; do you hear? Why should I cause a delay?" She turned swiftly to Lady Varley. "He shall do it now—this moment," she said, with a little air of authority, for which O'Grady could willingly have slain her.

Whether she meant it or not, her words, her manner, were in bad taste. As she seldom made a mistake, it must be considered that she did mean them.

Lady Varley threw up her head.

"No," she said, in a low tone, but imperiously. The word rang through the air. The other woman gave way a little, and for a second her teeth bit her under-lip. Then it was all over. Yolande, as quickly as she had lost it, regained her temper, and turned a face determinately calm on Donna.

"It is of no consequence at all," she said, "I beg you will think no more of it. Go and enjoy—your flowers."

She moved to one side, thus giving a dismissal, and sank into a low garden-chair. She sat quite motionless until her husband and Mrs. Dundas were out of sight; then she rose to her feet and confronted O'Grady with a rather wan smile. It hurt him to think that she should thus pain herself in an attempt to throw off care, to show him civility. This was treating him like an ordinary acquaintance. He started as he came to this point in his meditations. Could it be possible that he was less than an ordinary acquaintance—that he was a bare stranger? Could it be true that he had seen her only once before? An absurd feeling that he had known her all the days of his life had taken possession of him.

"I forgot," she said slowly, "you too might have liked—to see the flowers. They are," striving to regain the ordinary every-day tone, "well worth a glance. We have a wonderful man from Aberdeen, who understands the culture of——"

"Pray do not," interrupted O'Grady earnestly. She stopped as if thankful. "You look very tired," he went on; "shall I take you back to the house?"

"Yes, that is it," she said feverishly. She looked passionately relieved. "I cannot bear to leave her for any long time," she went on as if explaining; "I always feel as if—as if I must keep her in sight." She sighed heavily, then looked at him suspiciously as though dreading the effect of her words. "I shall send that telegram myself," she said, "though you will understand that it is a mere freak of mine; a rather unnecessary caution."

"I quite understand," returned O'Grady gravely.

He turned with her, and went back to the house by a side path that did not converge towards the walk by which Mrs. Dundas and Varley had gone.

As these last had disappeared round the corner, and when she found they were quite beyond view, Mrs. Dundas had stopped short and looked at Varley, a fine contempt in her eye. Her mind was full of his

fatal disclosure, anent the true meaning of her coming to the particular spot where Lady Varley was found.

"You have every right to be proud of yourself," she said, an unmitigated scorn in voice and gesture.

"So I think; at the present moment, at all events. I am your companion," replied Varley courteously.

"Why on earth did you say that?"

"Well?" He looked mystified. "Isn't it the truth?" He had not heard her assertion, so failed to understand the effect his words had produced.

"Pouf!" She opened and shut her fan with an angry clack. "The truth? That is just what makes it the very mischief! There is nothing one should avoid like the truth!"

"Then am I to swear to you that I am not your companion? Anything to oblige you, *très-belle*," said he, lifting his brows.

Mrs. Dundas stared.

"What are you maundering about now?" she demanded, with that elegance of language that distinguishes her—and her kind. Then slowly the facts of the case dawned upon her. "I do hate a fool!" she said disdainfully. Which piece of outspoken criticism so tickled Varley, that he roared with laughter for a full minute without cessation. To him, it was one of Mrs. Dundas's charms that she could always amuse him. Presently she was good-tempered, she laughed too, and after that explained to him his fault, which only seemed to increase his amusement.

"It's a judgment upon you. You see you oughtn't to lie, Don," said he. "Well, the whole affair was hardly worth that frown of yours. Yolande is incapable of bearing malice, even if she understood; which I am sure she didn't."

"Which I am sure she did. I watched her hands. A woman can command her eyes, but her fingers never. As you spoke she clutched tightly a little fold of her gown. And, good heavens! what a gown, suggestive of sackcloth and ashes! She must be doing penance for your sins, my good boy."

"You pay her a compliment. You exonerate her from sins of her own."

"As for that," said Donna—she shrugged her shoulders and threw out her hands in the little foreign fashion that clung to her—"it strikes me that she was rather glad to get us out of the way. She could not accompany me to the houses, she was too tired. That secluded walk was pleasant, let me tell you. And—that Mr. O'Grady—very good to look at."

A light that was malicious brightened her eyes, a laugh that was not godly broke from her lips. Varley's brow grew black.

"You are at fault there," he said coldly. "For the future let us leave Lady Varley's name out of our conversation."

CHAPTER IX.

SHOWING HOW THE MACGILLICUDDYS WERE AT HOME TO
A T.

CONSTANTIA was busy with her afternoon tea-table. Not that it was afternoon yet. It was indeed quite early, barely eleven o'clock. But Constantia, nevertheless, was in a very agony of bustle, this being the first time she had ever entertained anybody, or seen anybody entertained within the walls of The Cottage.

And it was not to be the orthodox, meagre tea either, where a cup is handed round to one with a morsel of cake or a bit of bread-and-butter, but a real, honest, handsome affair, with a snowy cloth, and hot cakes and cold cakes, and jam, and honey, and delicate little tartlets that Mulcahy was an adept at making when safe from the thimbleful. She, Mulcahy, was in wonderful preservation so far, and quite gay in the knowledge that she was somehow circumventing Miss MacGillicuddy, who would have died rather than waste a cup of tea on any one.

Constantia had got out all the best china—the lovely old Crown Derby that was shut away in a corner, and denied the light from year's end to year's end. It looked what it was, very beautiful,

and the silver tea-pot, and sugar bowl, and cream ewer of a quaint Queen Anne shape shone amongst it.

There were flowers, too, in profusion, though it was only May, and as yet the roses were a little shy. The whole room smelled sweetly of them; the shabby little parlour, with its dull curtains, and worn carpet, and general air of angry depression. There was an exquisite view from it, however, that had a touch of salt spray in it, and a wild washing of waves against great barren cliffs; and, as I have said, the odour of the flowers pervaded it.

Norah was standing beside the table lost in admiration, as Constantia put in a blossom here—in the huge bowl that adorned the centre of it—or took one out there. As she watched she crooned little verses to herself, and stood now on one leg and now on the other. She was restless with excitement, and rather worried Constantia with her convictions, that up to this Donna Dundas had never yet seen so desirable an entertainment as was now going to be offered to her.

“Don’t be a goose, Norah,” said Constantia, with that noble simplicity of language that characterised the MacGillicuddys when conversing in private one with the other. “Donna has lived in such an atmosphere of luxury all her life, that she will feel nothing but an intense amusement when she sees the arrangements you so much admire.”

She sighed. She herself, she could not deny, had a hankering after the luxurious atmosphere. It was abominable to be always counting the cost.

Norah was indignant.

“I don’t believe a word of it,” she said. “Everything looks lovely; and if you ask a person to tea they know what they are going to get, don’t they? And there is only one thing necessary, and that is to make it strong enough. I have told Mulcahy, and she says it will be stingo. Oh, Connie, how beautifully you are arranging those flowers! There must be some charm in the ends of your fingers—a ‘pishogue,’ Mulcahy calls it.”

“I really wish, Norah, you would keep out of the

kitchen, and cease to make a dictionary of Mulcahy's vulgar words."

"She says she thinks you will marry Garrett Barry."

"If I do, the first thing I shall manage is your dismissal to a good school."

"Then I hope to goodness he won't ask you." She said this spitefully, but a second later forgot her anger, and went on lovingly: "Connie, listen. When you do marry, I hope you will have lawns, and gardens, and conservatories, and things; you would suit them so nicely."

Constantia blushed. Mr. Featherston had "lawns, and gardens, and conservatories, and things," but would he ask her to reign over them?

At this moment George, who had been fishing since early dawn, came in, and flung his basket on the ground, and looked with an admiration wide as Norah's at the table.

"I say, what a spread!" said he, a distinctly vulgar joy in his glance. "How did you do it? What a girl you are, Con!" He advanced towards her with open arms. "What a regular swe-e-e-tie! Oh, *why* am I your brother?"

"Why, indeed!" returned she, with cold disdain. "I am sure nobody would think it."

"What misfortune flung us both into the same cradle? If I were somebody else's brother, let me tell you (with an eye on those cakes) that I should not hesitate for a moment—I should instantly marry you."

"I don't think you would," said Constantia drily.

She moved back, to avoid the embrace that was descending upon her, but too late. George, before she could escape, had enveloped her in a bearlike hug, that only gained in intensity as he felt her shrink from it.

"Oh!" cried she indignantly, pushing him away; "what a wretch you are! Now look at my sleeve! There is the lace in ribbons!"

"Never mind; you know it isn't the gown you are going to wear when they come," put in Norah soothingly.

"What a fuss about nothing!" declared George, indignant in turn. "One would think I had rent you limb from limb. Why, yesterday Featherston tore your dress very nearly off your back, and you said nothing at all to him. In fact, you beamed upon him when he did it, as though he had done you a good turn. What hypocrites girls are!"

"Who said I beamed on Mr. Featherston?"

"I do, I saw you." Then he threw himself into an attitude and began to imitate her in a high squeak: "'Oh, it doesn't matter at all, Mr. Featherston. It is really of no consequence whatever. I assure you I quite *liked* it. I do hope you will do it again as soon as ever you can.' Pah!"

"You are, without exception, the most hateful boy I ever met," said Constantia, with tears in her eyes. "How dare you say I so spoke to Mr. Featherston when you know I—I——"

"Love him," supplied George, unabashed.

"I really wish, George, you would take yourself and your horrid fish out of this," broke in Norah, who couldn't bear to see the tears in Constantia's eyes. "Go and wash your face and make yourself respectable before they come."

"At eleven o'clock! I think I see myself. At four I shall put in a very dignified and aristocratic appearance, but not a moment sooner. I say, Con, I'm sorry if I vexed you, old girl. See, I caught all these trout for you, and beauties they are; you shall have them for your breakfast, and I'll cook them myself in a way the Red Indians do them, and that I'm sure is a grand plan."

Constantia laughed, which meant that the breach was healed.

"I was just saying to Connie, as you came in," said Norah, addressing George, with a tinge of melancholy in her tone, "that I hope when she marries she will have everything lovely round her, she would know so well what to do with them."

"That remark would be quite as applicable to me," responded George. "I should know what to do with them—I should eat them. As for marriage, I

can't see why Connie hesitates; if she won't have Featherston there is Barry, and if she turns up her nose at Barry there is still Stronge the blanket man, snug and warm. Really, on the whole I think I should recommend Stronge. After the way in which he distinguished himself the other day at hare and hounds by falling into and over everything, without looking very much the worse for wear afterwards, I am inclined to think he must be considerably on this side of ninety."

"Nonsense! Donna says he is only thirty-five," exclaimed Norah, who was a rabid partisan of Stronge's.

"It would not matter if he were on the wrong side of a hundred," said Constantia, putting her head to one side to mark the effect of the last flower put into the Chelsea bowl. "To fancy him would require an effort. He is, in my opinion, about the ugliest man you could see anywhere for a penny."

She straightened her head and lifted it to make another remark, but the words froze on her tongue. There was an open window right behind where Norah and George were standing, a window almost on the ground (as were all the windows on the floor of The Cottage), and at it stood—Mr. Stronge! There was something in his face that told her he had heard her luckless speech.

Her agony of regret, her horror, so changed her expression that Norah and George, looking at her, felt that something awful must have happened. Instinctively they glanced behind them, and then as instinctively they fled!

Constantia was alone. In her need (as she told herself bitterly) they had deserted her, and left her to face "the ugliest man you could see anywhere for a penny" unbefriended! She stood motionless for a full minute, unable to lift her eyes from the carpet; and then, having discovered that the unsympathetic earth was not going to open and swallow her up quick, she drew her breath hard, and lifted a face shamed and crimson to Mr. Stronge.

He himself was decidedly pink as he stepped

through the window and came straight towards her.

"Never mind," said he earnestly. He took one of her hands and pressed it kindly. The distress on her pretty face made him so miserable that he hardly knew what he did. "What on earth does it matter?" he exclaimed. "Think no more of it. I cannot bear to see that look in your eyes."

He had become quite calm now, and, remembering, sought to release her hand; but her fingers tightened upon his, and held him closely.

"Oh, I am so sorry!" she stammered, tears filling her eyes. "And besides, it wasn't true. Only George is so tormenting, and he was saying——" She broke off abruptly, and grew even redder. "I mean—that is—there really wasn't a word of truth in it. I have known any amount of people *ever so much uglier*. Oh no, that is not it!" cried she, horrified at her last mistake, which indeed crowned the other. "I mean I have known many not so good-looking as——"

Mr. Stronge broke into a loud and hearty laugh. It was a laugh evidently from his heart, and irrepressible, and it had the effect of at once dispersing the cobwebs of awkwardness that hung on the mental atmosphere.

"Let us adhere to the truth at all risks," entreated he, still laughing. "If Nature refused me her blandishments, who shall dare to blame her? Not I, for one. We can't be all like—you, for example."

He bowed over the little hand he still held, and kissed it lightly—so lightly that it would have been impossible for her to understand the depth of the happiness he felt as his lips touched her. He was now smiling at her with the gentlest eyes in the world.

"But still—you *must* listen to me—I say you are not ugly," persisted Constantia. "And—and I don't suppose you will ever like me again, but——"

"Do not say that," interrupted he, still smiling, though now his smile had taken a tinge of sadness. "I shall always—like you—as you put it."

"It is very good of you, then," said Constantia dejectedly. "And I only hope that by-and-by, when

you leave this, you won't think it over and change your mind about me. But if you do, please—*please* remember how dreadfully sorry I was."

"Tut! Nonsense!" said he gaily.

At this juncture the door was partially opened, and Norah's head appeared. Finding matters on quite an amiable footing, she took heart of grace and entered boldly. Behind her was George. They had both been, evidently, listening outside in the hall to see if their assistance would be required in case Mr. Stronge should take the affair badly. Assault and battery might have been in their minds, to judge of the anxious faces that first presented themselves. However, they now grew quite chirpy, and advanced on Mr. Stronge with beaming faces and extended hands.

He met them half-way. He had grasped the situation at a glance, and was amused by it. When he had greeted them, he went back to the window and stepped outside. Was he going away? The consternation of the MacGillicuddys was intense. Constantia grew pale. Mr. Stronge, however, only stooped to the ground, and then brought to view a large basket, which he placed with some difficulty upon the sill.

"I—I thought you might like some strawberries for—Mrs. Dundas," he said. "My gardener tells me they are early, and so I brought them."

"Brought them!" exclaimed George, surveying the dimensions of the basket.

"Drove to the gate, and brought them down the avenue."

"Strawberries!" cried Constantia and Norah in a breath. There was another pair of famous Chelsea dishes downstairs; upon them they would look just beautiful. Norah cast a lightning glance at Constantia. "*Now* will she laugh?" said the glance.

"Oh, how good of you—how quite too good!" said Constantia, with a remorseful glance at Stronge. "They were the very things, of all others, we wanted. But you have robbed yourself," looking at the large and apparently very heavy basket he had now lifted

into the room. "We—we shan't know what to do with all those."

"To tell you the truth," began Stronge, growing very red, and bending determinedly over the basket as if to take out the strawberries. He did not tell the truth, however, whatever it was, but paused in a rather ignominious manner, and looked so confused that the three pair of eyes watching him came to the conclusion that he was, somehow, thoroughly ashamed of himself.

"Yes?" said Constantia at last, very gently. She was feeling wonderfully kindly towards him just then; she wanted to help him if she could.

"Well, it is this," said Stronge—"that I thought, knowing Mrs. Dundas abroad, you see, and being pretty well acquainted with her tastes, I thought—in fact, I knew—she would like a glass of champagne; and I—fancied—it would please you," looking entreatingly, as if for pardon, at Constantia, "to have it to give her. Of course, I should not have presumed to bring it but that I knew of your aunt's objection to wine of any sort, and therefore guessed it would not be in the house."

"In the house? Was it ever in the house?" thought Constantia, and her brow clouded. Stronge, seeing the sudden cloud, misunderstood it.

"But—but if you think I shouldn't—if, that is, you think it better not—why," seizing the basket in his agitation, "I can take it away again."

"Take it away? Oh, *don't!*" cried Constantia, with a gesture full of entreaty. "Champagne! Why, it is the very thing. I don't believe in Donna and tea conjoined, but Donna and champagne!! That sounds quite correct." She went up to him. Her face was charming always, but now it was really lovely, with the sparkle of excitement in the eyes, and the quick smile on the mobile lips. "How did you think of it all?" she said. "You are the kindest man on earth, I think. How you *must* have studied Donna!"

If she had arranged the speech, it could not have hurt him more. So that was how she took it? He

studied Donna; not her! Good heavens! how blind, how ungrateful a woman can be, when her thoughts are full of another! He had felt great joy when his present was accepted; when he knew he had not offended the one he loved best on earth, in his desire to please her; but now——

"I was not thinking of Mrs. Dundas," he said stiffly.

"No, of course not," exclaimed Norah, with an indignant glance at Constantia, who had really meant nothing unkind. "You thought of Connie, wasn't that it?" She had thrust her arm through her *protégé's*, and was looking at him with a tender, protective gaze.

"Yes, that was it," returned he, smiling; something in Constantia's surprised face that told him she had meant nothing by her words, had reassured him. "I only came down for a moment to bring these things," he said, "but I'll be back about four. Will that do, Miss MacGillicuddy?"

"Don't be later," said she, with an anxiety that sent his blood rushing gladly through his veins. He looked round him.

"How pretty the table is!" he said at last. Indeed, the flowers were so exquisitely arranged that they struck him at once. "What lovely china! Real Crown Derby, eh? It is hardly to be mistaken." He took up one of the cups and examined it with genuine admiration. "And that Chelsea bowl! The whole effect is so charming that you must forgive my remarking it."

They forgave him with a heart and a half. They were indeed delighted with his criticism. The knowledge that his own house was a very magnificent affair, and that footmen in plush and many such purchasable luxuries were not unknown to it, only added to the worth of his opinion.

"I have a few pretty things at Inchirone," he said, looking at Constantia. "I wish you could see them. You have been at Inchirone?"

"Yes. In the Desmonds' time," replied she, flushing warmly. The Desmonds were a good old

Irish family who had come to grief, and whose estate had been put in the market and bought by old Stronge—the blanket man, Andrew Stronge's father.

"But never since?" asked he, taking no notice of her quick change of colour, though he felt it, and understood it thoroughly.

"No." She shook her head, paused a little, and then said impulsively, "but I should like to."

"Should you really?" asked he eagerly. "Of course I have been longing to ask you, that is, everybody to Inchirone for ever so long, but there is something so specially awkward about being a bachelor. Nobody to receive anybody, as it were. Now if I had a wife——"

He stopped dead short, and became visibly embarrassed—so embarrassed, indeed, that he held down his head, and grasped his hat vigorously, and stared into it with all the fervour of one who was going to say a devotional word or two, or who was ambitious about learning by rote the name of his hatter.

"Ah, yes, if you only had a wife!" said Constantia, who had returned to the flowers, and was so busy over a tiny bit of trailing ivy that she had not time to notice his face. It was very unfortunate, as she acknowledged afterwards, but the fact was that by this simple remark of hers, she gave him an encouragement she never intended. "Still," she went on, "I don't see why you couldn't give us a dance, or something, in spite of that great want of yours."

"Yes, a dance; with Chinese lanterns in those lovely groves, and a band, and a moon," cried Norah, clapping her hands. The latter article she plainly regarded as an item to be supplied by contract. "Oh, do think of it, dear Mr. Stronge!"

"Yes, do," said Constantia, which of course decided the question.

"You shall have your dance, your Chinese lanterns, even your moon, I hope, Miss Norah!" said Stronge, answering the child rather than the child's sister, though the latter was to him more precious than rubies.

"Oh, no, I shan't," said Norah sadly. "Aunt Bridget would not let me go anywhere."

"She shall—to me," said Stronge. "I'll see to it." He lifted the slender figure in his arms and kissed her cheeks one after the other, then placed her on the ground. But Norah still clung to him.

"I do love you, I *do*!" she whispered, with extreme affection in her dark, childish eyes. Stronge held her to him for a moment. Her affection was sweet to him, and yet, alas! why could not Constantia say what she had said?

He left them a minute or two later. His back was hardly turned, when George the irrepressible burst into a gay laugh.

"I do think that a fellow in love," said he, "is the most remarkable sight that can be offered one. Stronge, now, is as admirable a specimen of the really deep dye as one could desire. What did he say to you, Con? Did he upbraid you for your rather personal remark? Or did he like it? Lovers, they say, like anything, but that of yours was a tough one to digest, and no mistake. I conclude by his amiability when we appeared, that as a salve to your rudeness, you had just said 'yes' to his honourable proposals."

Constantia presented an impassive front to this charge.

"Andrew Stronge!" went on George meditatively. "I say, Connie, have you considered the numerous 'afterwards'? One of them lies in that name alone. You will have to call him *Andy*. Andrew will do very well for state occasions; but when you want a new bonnet, or a trip to the moon, it will have to be Andy. It is homely, no doubt (and there is a great charm in that), but it is scarcely poetical."

"Better 'Andy' than 'Garry,' at all events," broke in Norah, flashing an indignant glance at him. "When I see Mr. Barry, all I can ever think of is 'Garry Owen!' I'd hate a husband with a name like that."

This was distinctly ungrateful of her, Barry being quite a devotee of hers; but she still stood faithful to Stronge, who had her first love.

"I call Garry better than Andy, any day," said George, who found great joy in a skirmish with Norah, who was a veritable firebrand.

"And I call Andy better than Garry," persisted she.

"If I were you," said George artlessly, "I would not argue—with a smut upon the extreme tip of your nose."

This put an end to all conversation for the time being.

CHAPTER X.

SHOWING HOW, EVEN IN THESE MODERN DAYS, THE SKELETON
CAN SHOW ITSELF AT THE FEAST.

DONNA came in admirable time. She was not late, as was her wont, there being no people before whom to make a successful *entrée*. She came therefore quite early, and was evidently in even higher spirits than usual. Mr. Dundas, she said, could not accompany her because he was busy farming, or slug-hunting, or something, at all events, connected with the soil. She kissed Constantia, and told Norah she was a mouse, and begged George to take her to see the new puppies, whose fame, she said, had gone out throughout the land. George certainly was captivated by her, and Constantia was pleased, though Norah refused to be bought by that endearing term, "mouse." She was an *enfant terrible* in many ways, and had made up her mind long ago, that Donna Dundas was not to be placed upon her list of friends.

Mr. Barry came presently, and so did Mrs. Blake, the doctor's wife. "Jack was so sorry, but he could not come, having been sent for at the very last moment by Mrs. Murphy, who was—at it again." Jack was the doctor, and this bit of special information was whispered into Donna's ear by his gay little wife, who was one of the Burkes of Sligo, and as

merry as a cricket. "That wretched Mrs. Murphy ! Nine if there was one, and the last only eleven months. Now, who would have thought she would be so inconsiderate as to want Jack to-day, of all others ?"

"That's always the way," said Constantia ; "nothing fulfils itself, save the unexpected."

"Quite so, my love," chimed in George, who had just come up behind her, "very true. Only we've heard that trite remark once or twice before, and—the other fellow has said it so much better."

Donna was in the very gayest spirits. She said very little of her husband, but that was not surprising, as she seldom alluded to him in any way. She did not seem to think it odd, however, that Mrs. Blake interlarded her conversation with incessant allusions to Jack here and Jack there, and, indeed, rather encouraged that funny little matron to talk of her doctor, and made herself excessively agreeable to her.

After a little while, however, her gaiety decreased in a measure, and Constantia detected her in the act of stifling a yawn. She knew that Constantia had detected her, and she laughed.

"An affection of the jaws, Con," said she. "Don't be uneasy about it. It comes and goes, and is never serious."

"Time for tea," thought Connie ; and as Mr. Stronge arrived at this opportune moment, she forthwith carried them all off into the tiny dining-room, where really everything looked wonderfully pretty—considering. It was very warm, and the windows were thrown wide open to catch any passing breeze. Constantia was busy with the Queen Anne tea-pot and the importance of the hour, but Norah's brain was free to watch and wonder. She had noticed that Donna was not pleased when Mr. Stronge came in, and this slight to her favourite hardened her heart the more against her red-haired guest. She had also noticed the decline of Donna's gaiety, and now she became aware of something else.

All in a second, as it were, Donna's colour had deepened, and her great eyes had taken an additional

increase of light. There was a step upon the gravel outside, a hesitation such as might arise from the flinging away of a cigar, and then a man stepped lightly up to the open window and looked into the room, a little uncertainly at first until his eyes met Donna's. There they stayed.

It was Lord Varley! When he had answered the unspoken question on Donna's face—which had a good deal of angry impatience in it—he turned and addressed himself to Constantia.

“What! holding high revelry?” cried he, a whole tome of reproach in his air. “Oh, Connie!” When he was only Frederic Grande there was a great intimacy between him and the young MacGillicuddys, an intimacy that had continued ever since. “Why was I not bidden? Why was I the only one excluded? All the county, as it seems to me, is at your festive board, and I alone, your oldest friend, left out.”

Constantia laughed.

“Well, better late than never. Come in now, at all events,” said she.

“I have half a mind to refuse so late a call. But I was born without that orthodox spark of pride, so here goes.” He vaulted lightly into the room and approached the table. He shook hands quite affectionately with Connie, and politely with Mrs. Dundas; to the others he nodded generally. There was a slight movement amongst them all, and Donna drawing aside her lace skirts with a rather ungracious air, he sank down into the seat by her side.

“Didn't you know Connie had asked Donna to tea?” asked Norah inquisitively, leaning forward, a strawberry between her lips, to get the answer.

“No,” said Varley, very emphatically.

“Then what brought you?” went on the hospitable Norah, an unflinching determination to run the question to earth written upon her brow.

“Alas, Norah!” said Lord Varley. “Is it then forbidden me to come here openly to pay my addresses to you? Must business, cold and bald, alone permit my presence? So be it, then.”

“Rubbish!” exclaimed Norah, with illimitable dis-

dain, returning to her fruit with a little *moue* that quite transfigured her quaint, sharp young face.

"Business brought me, indeed," went on Varley, speaking to Constantia now. "I met in the village our respected organist, old Mrs. O'Flanagan, and she desired me to tell you, if I saw you, that the first hymn for next Sunday would be that dear old favourite of ours: 'Blow ye the trumpet, blow ho—ho—ho—ho!'" He imitated the usual mode of singing this hymn in the parish church with a solemn air, and then stopped short and fell back upon the strawberries. "Early for them, isn't it?" he said.

But he got no answer beyond a groan that went up from Constantia, George, and Barry, all at once.

"That one again!" cried Constantia at last, with large indignation. "What a woman that is!" She alluded in wrathful tones to the organist, Mrs. O'Flanagan, who for thirty years or so had presided over the squeaky old instrument called an organ, that decorated the village church and annoyed the village choir. The latter was tyrannised over by another ancient dame, who went hand in glove with the organist, chiefly because of an objection to join in with the youth of the parish, who to her appeared frivolous, and positively radical in their desire for change. What *could* they want more than the good old tunes to which their forefathers had given their voices in the good old times?

This staunch Conservative, whose name was Stan-nerley, led the music, chants, hymns, and psalms, every Sunday, in a high, squeaky voice that once, in the past century, perchance, had been harmonious, but now was sad indeed. It declined and fell like Gibbon's Roman Empire, and when it rose at all, as on occasion it did with the greatest presumption, it cracked miserably on the first high note, to the dis-comfiture of the older portion of the congregation, and the intense and open joy of the younger.

The rector, poor man, had made strenuous efforts to reconcile the former and the latter reign, but with no effect. The old ladies still clung to the "no innovation" cry, and the younger ones sulked

prettily. There was considerable talk of a new organ that would need the services of a new organist. But this happy thought seemed far from being realised, subscriptions coming in but slowly, and there being indeed but few in the parish whose worldly status would permit of their giving largely to even so admirable a cause. Lately a good many people had been drafted into the neighbourhood, but as yet the rector was either too modest or too disheartened to make a charge upon them.

The hymn mentioned by Lord Varley was a specially favourite one with Mrs. O'Flanagan and her colleague of the squeaky voice. They sang it so slowly that it sounded like a funeral dirge, and the termination of the "blow" always resulted in a series of "ho, ho, hos," that were very nearly irreverent, and gave occasion for unlimited mirth, or badly suppressed indignation, as the dispositions of the hearers led them.

Just now it drew forth a prolonged groan from Mrs. Blake, the MacGillicuddys, and Barry. The latter had an exquisite baritone voice and was a passionate lover of music, so that to him this torturing of the ear polite was as an excruciating torment. Oh, to be rid of Mrs. O'Flanagan and her discordancies, and her partner in villainous sounds, Mrs. Stannerley!

"Not that hymn again! At least not that one!" exclaimed Constantia, with quite an air of entreaty. "We have had it now every second Sunday since Christmas, and I can't stand much more of it."

"You shan't," put in Barry in a sepulchral tone. "They have pushed it just the trifle too far, and now its death-warrant is signed." He spoke with deep earnestness, and then subsided into a reverie, out of which he presently emerged with a cheerful face and a mind apparently made up. He beamed upon Constantia. "That hymn annoys you as well as me," he said. "Well, be happy, then! I have meditated, I have wrestled in thought, I have conquered. Be consoled. Next Sunday shall ring in the funeral dirge of that unpalatable air."

Nobody took much notice of him. He spoke to a

rather inattentive audience, that was discussing the rector, the chances of a new organ, and the curate—more especially the curate. This was Mr. Evans, who was also the principal of the college.

“He wouldn’t be half bad,” said Mr. Stronge, “if he weren’t so imbued with a sense of his own importance (which is very uncomfortably small), and if his voice was human; but it is considerably more English than anything I ever heard in England.”

“Oh, apropos of that,” said Barry, who had waked out of his abstraction, “did you hear about him and Mrs. Harrington—the very last little episode, I mean, with her? You know he keeps himself very much *en évidence*, and has always a clean pinafore on and his hair smooth when in her presence, with a view to her conciliation, because she has so many little boys coming on who must be educated somewhere.”

“And why not with him? I see,” said Stronge.

“She has become a Blue Ribbonite ever since her doctor forbid her stimulants of any sort, and she found herself in want of a fresh sensation. Evans followed suit, as in duty bound, and is now a first-class apostle of the temperance creed.”

“But what has all this to do with his voice?” asked Mrs. Blake, who wanted to hear the very last bit of scandal. The rest of it was a tale that was told.

“I’ll tell you,” said Barry; “only Mrs. Dundas and Stronge haven’t read Volume I. With regard to his voice, you know he makes his a’s o’s, and generally plays ‘Old Harry’ with his vowels. Well, the other day he went up to Cairns, and, when his visit was at an end, found himself in the hall with Mrs. Harrington. He knew she prided herself upon the hall, which is, indeed, a special feature at Cairns.”

“It is every feature rolled into one. It is the whole house,” said Mrs. Blake.

“It’s a nice bit of architecture, and beyond dispute old,” put in Varley.

“If it had been young it would have been the same to Evans, whose antecedents, I should say, would preclude the possibility of knowledge of ancestral

halls; but he knew it was her pet hobby, so he stopped short in the middle of it, clasped his hands reverently, and said, in a low, rapturous tone: 'What a hole!' He meant hall, poor man, but his extraordinary accent was the undoing of him."

Constantia burst out laughing.

"How did Mrs. Harrington take it?" asked she.

"Badly. She will not now be persuaded that he did not mean it. She thinks herself clever, but in reality her brains are of a very mediocre quality. She abuses him right and left, and has opened negotiations with the master of a German school, with a view to sending her eldest son abroad, to avoid the pernicious influences of home teachings."

"Poor Bobby Harrington!" said George. "I wonder how he will like the black bread and the sauerkraut, the unkempt wigs, and the dirt generally? I guess he'll have to whistle for his bath there."

"Nonsense!" said Constantia, "I dare say he will find himself much happier there than at home."

"Which won't be saying much for him," laughed Mrs. Blake.

"So that is the end of the faithful friendship between the Evans's and the Harringtons."

"The extreme end. Mrs. Harrington goes about now, everywhere, telling all of her acquaintance how insolent Mr. Evans has been to her, his best friend (she dwells strongly upon favours past), and how he called the best bit of her house 'a hole.'"

"Mr. Evans is to be pitied," said Constantia. "And after all he has sacrificed, too, for her! Sometimes even his self-respect."

"A man like that is not to be pitied!" exclaimed Mrs. Dundas, with a curl of her short upper lip. "Pouf! What a poor creature! You agree with me?" She spoke to Varley, who, however, made her no reply. Self-respect! Where was his?

"Oh, yes, pity is due to him in a measure," said Mrs. Blake. "He has gone so far with the Blue Ribbon measure that he cannot now draw back, and to face the world for ever with a blue rag pinned upon one's breast, requires courage."

"It won't disconcert him," said Barry, "he is as fond of water as a duck."

"Or Sir Wilfrid Lawson," suggested Stronge, laughing.

"From what you have said, yes, after all, I withdraw my first words; he *is* worthy of pity!" cried Donna gaily.

She was looking lovely, radiant. She was picking out, in a dainty fashion, the biggest strawberries from the dish before her, and was evidently enjoying them. She had said no to the tea, and yes to the champagne, and was enjoying that, too, quite thoroughly, though drinking it out of a tumbler.

When the Blue Ribbon craze overtook old Miss MacGillicuddy, she had fallen foul of wine-glasses, and had consigned them to the lowest depths, in other words, the underground cellar. Wine-glasses! vile, immoral word! Out of her sight with them; miserable reminders as they were of demoralising pagan orgies! She would have broken the unoffending glasses but for the frugal spirit within her, and failing courage to annihilate what had cost good money, she squared matters with her conscience by consigning them to limbo. A limbo inaccessible, considering the key of it was always in her own pocket; there they would never see the light of day, or tempt the transgressor to a persistence in his folly.

"Well, you see it was business brought me," said Lord Varley generally; "or shall we say it kept me?" Here he looked at Donna. "I should have presented myself earlier, no doubt, but for Mrs. O'Flanagan's reiterated injunctions; but I assure you I ran all the way here, once I had got rid of her, so as to be in time!"

"In time for what?" asked Norah sharply.

"To see you," replied Varley, laughing. "Haven't I just told you how I ran all the way?"

"You don't seem over fatigued!" remarked Mrs. Dundas drily. "Your anxiety to be with your beloved has not taken much out of you. You look pretty cool, considering!"

"Do you doubt me?" asked he. His tone was in

a measure jesting, yet there was an undercurrent of serious meaning in it, that betrayed itself to Stronge.

Mrs. Dundas smiled and dropped her eyes. She helped herself to another large strawberry, and leisurely picked off its stem with a view to crushing it into the thick, sweet cream upon her plate.

"I never doubt," she said slowly, "I always know!"

At this instant the door was thrown open, and Minnie, who was a person of impulse, almost precipitated two men into the room.

"Mr. Featherston, Mr. O'Grady," cried she at the top of a fresh, jubilant voice. She was evidently delighted with this addition to Miss Connie's party. "The more the merrier," was a motto of hers, when "the more" meant men.

Constantia started visibly and blushed crimson. She had not had the courage to invite Featherston, and now he had come! Did all the world know of this simple affair of hers? If so, there would be a reckoning when Aunt Bridget came home. She was so prettily, so softly confused, that Featherston could not fail to mark it, and it was apparent also to those other two who loved her. Stronge, noticing that quick, bright flush, paled perceptibly, and Barry grew stormy as a thundercloud. There was little love lost between him and Featherston at any time, but now Barry's thoughts grew murderous. He recovered himself, however, almost at once, and matters went on smoothly.

Featherston, after a swift, surprised glance at those already in the room, had looked at Constantia with a certain sense of injury in his glance. If every one else was here, why had he been ignored? Lord Varley even! She understood the mute reproach, and was sorely stricken by it; but how could she explain to him all things then, and that Donna had asked herself, and that Varley had not been asked at all?

Featherston, after that one swift glance, had found a chair and seated himself at the corner of the table next to her, and therefore next to Donna, who

drew her skirts aside with that indescribable little gesture of hers, that was so full of fascination because so full of welcome, and had given him a smile that was dazzling.

O'Grady, who was comparatively a stranger, and who was standing near Constantia, saw the smile, and wondered about several things.

"Mr. O'Grady, can you find a chair?" said Connie, timidly, but graciously. She liked the tall, lean traveller. "George, get a chair for Mr. O'Grady. I am sorry," she went on gravely, because of a little saddening that she felt on account of that reproachful glance of Featherston's, "I am sorry there is not more room for everybody, but—— May I ask you to try and squeeze in here, just near to me; and will you have some strawberries? or some of this cake? I made it myself. And shall I introduce you to—— Donna, do you know Mr. O'Grady?"

"Yes. We have met," said Donna, leaning far back on her chair, so as to turn up a lovely, smiling face to O'Grady. It was a face full of fascination, but O'Grady, after the coldest recognition of its merits, turned aside, and devoted himself to his hostess. He thought her a sweet little girl, and did full justice to the honesty of the clear eyes and the firm lips. Donna followed his movements meditatively. She acknowledged her defeat, and quite understood that he wished to show her discourtesy in a courteous manner, or at least to refuse to be charmed by her, charm she never so wisely. When she had altogether satisfied herself about this, she drew her breath softly but sharply, and instinctively glanced at Stronge, to find him regarding her with an attention deep enough to have excited pleasure in her breast. It created, however, only suspicion.

"Already two foes," she said to herself; "and they, too, of the wrong sex!"

She shook off her momentary chagrin and prepared to make herself charming to Featherston. To do this she was compelled to turn her shoulder upon Varley, which also suited her.

"Donna," said Constantia presently, leaning to-

wards her, "do you know that Mr. Stronge is going to invite us all some evening to that wonderful stronghold of his, Inchirone?"

"Ah, so!" cried Mrs. Dundas. "Now, what a happy thought! But do not let the 'some evening' be too soon, I entreat you, Mr. Stronge; because I have some people coming to me at the end of next week, and it will be a common charity to help me to entertain them."

"Let us say the week after next, then," returned Stronge, agreeably, if rather indifferently.

"Donna," said Featherston. A dead pause followed his utterance of Mrs. Dundas's Christian name, and everybody looked at him inquiringly—Constantia with open astonishment and a quick flush, Varley with a frown. Featherston, however, was unmoved; and, after all, it appeared he was *not* addressing her—was merely giving sound to her name, which had puzzled him. "I hear it is Madonna in reality; but—You will pardon me, Mrs. Dundas," he said in his low, musical voice; "but your name has been such a cause of speculation to me. It is one so strange, so full of meaning. Is it your real name, or one assumed as being peculiarly adapted to——"

"To me?" asked Mrs. Dundas. She seemed amused. "It was assumed," she said; "in so far your guess was a correct one. It was bestowed upon me a long time ago as being specially suited to my features; a name suggestive of goodness only should belong to a face of the same type." She glanced at him from under her long lashes; it was a glance provocative and full of quick mischief. "I was never christened," she went on calmly; "but when a baby they called me Mary."

"Madonna Mary!" exclaimed Mrs. Blake, lifting her brows. Never to be christened! There certainly was something odd about the woman beyond her excessive beauty—something, was it heathenish?

"When Mrs. Dundas was quite a little girl," explained Constantia gravely, "an old artist in Rome was so struck by her likeness to a picture there of the Virgin that he named her 'The Modern Madonna.'

The picture was beautiful, I often heard—so good, so godly, so full of holy light!”

“That was old Gardi,” said Donna. “Yes; he used to say I had a face like an angel.” She burst out laughing.

“You must have been a very dear little girl,” said Featherston in quite a kind, brotherly sort of way.

“I expect I was,” returned she. “Dear at any price.”

Varley bent towards her, and said something that nobody could hear. Nobody wanted to hear it, except, as it appeared, Featherston, who caught a last word and made it public.

“Riding,” he said aloud; “were you talking of riding, Mrs. Dundas? That bay mare of yours is hardly up to the mark, I should say. This morning before breakfast, when I saw you and Lord Varley down by Ringrone, it occurred to me it was somewhat imprudent of you to venture abroad so early, on so sorry an animal. Dundas should see to it.”

Donna’s eyes took a darker hue.

“Would that sorry animal have been safer in the afternoon?” she asked, smiling.

“No, of course not; what nonsense!” cried young George MacGillicuddy, taking her side with a generous ardour, though altogether unaware of the under-meaning of the words spoken.

“Well, disregard my hint if you will,” said Featherston, shrugging his shoulders. “Hints as a rule fall through. But I can assure you there is no safety in the path you are now pursuing. That bay mare is thoroughly unsound, and liable to come to grief at any moment. Why, she hasn’t a leg to stand on. O’Grady, who saw her and you, this morning, agrees with me in warning you to——”

“I beg your pardon,” interrupted O’Grady, gently but coldly, “I should not presume to offer advice to Mrs. Dundas, on so very short an acquaintance.”

Varley, who was rather pale, now turned to Featherston.

“If advice is necessary,” he said, “it surely comes better from an old friend. An entire stranger should

in my opinion be the last to offer it. You see I agree with Mr. O'Grady in this." He smiled superciliously. "I know the bay mare well, of which you speak. It was, I believe, bought off your estate, through your steward."

"Tut! what a worry about such a soulless affair as a horse!" said Mrs. Dundas, with a charming *moue*. "Silly boy!" said she, addressing Varley with a half lenient, half coquettish air that gave her at once another charm.

"But——" began Varley somewhat hotly.

"Ah!" cried she merrily, "will nothing stop you? Must I then have recourse to force?" As she spoke she took up a huge strawberry, and pressed it with her dainty, slender fingers against his lips. Of course he took it, and of course, too, he laughed, and then the dangerous argument was at an end. But Featherston had sown his seed, and was not discontented. The seed sown was fear, and Mrs. Dundas in due time would reap it, and turn to him for advice in her perplexity, and know herself in his power. Yet, after all, he hardly knew Mrs. Dundas.

They waxed merrier as the minutes flew; Mrs. Blake, who loved tea better than anything in the world, except, perhaps, her husband, had just had another cup, and Donna a little more champagne.

Never had The Cottage been guilty of so much laughter. It was a regular frolic, and at odd moments Constantia's heart beat rather loudly in her bosom as she thought of what Aunt Bridget would say when she found it out, and thanked her stars so many miles lay between them at the present hour. Barry was in the middle of a rather exciting tale, and he stood up to illustrate it.

"Look," said he, "he held his hand up like this"—arm extended on high with a tumbler at the end of it—"he just took one step forward; every one knew the last second had arrived; they were breathless with suspense; their blood ran cold; when suddenly the door was flung wide open, and——"

He was quite right. It *was* flung open, and——
Miss MacGillicuddy stood upon the threshold!

CHAPTER XI.

SHOWING HOW MRS. DUNDAS TOLD A SUCCESSFUL LIE OR TWO, AND HOW MULCAHY CAME TO THE RESCUE.

THERE was silence in that parlour for a very considerable minute. Mr. Barry's tale had been illustrated for him far more generously than he either dreamt or desired. When the deadly lull had grown positively insupportable, it was broken in a rather dreadful manner. Mrs. Blake, who was young and delicately alive to the ludicrous, gave way to a wild and perfectly irrepressible burst of laughter.

This destroyed the spell that held them. Mr. Stronge, fearful for Constantia, rose abruptly to his feet and made a movement towards the Gorgon in the doorway. The others stirred more or less. Mrs. Blake, still shaking with laughter, went to the window; Varley and Mr. O'Grady took a step farther—they cleared the sill, and found themselves in the garden.

Constantia, however, though evidently frightened out of her wits, sat still; and Mrs. Dundas seemed entirely undisturbed. She looked at Miss MacGillicuddy, who was plainly fuming, with a pleased expectancy in her eye, and put another big strawberry between her sharp white teeth, with a sense of thorough enjoyment.

Mr. Stronge, who ought to have received the Victoria Cross, went up to Miss MacGillicuddy.

"Dear Miss MacGillicuddy, this is indeed an unexpected pleasure," he said. "But I fear you must be very tired. Do sit down, and let your niece give you a cup of tea."

"It is beyond my deserts, sir, that you should make me so welcome in my own home," replied Miss MacGillicuddy grimly.

She waved him back imperiously, and gazed with a stern glance around her. She looked from one to the other in turn, and marked where Mrs. Blake was standing, with her shoulders still moving convulsively,

in the window. She opened her lips as if to speak, and Barry, seeing this, rushed into the breach.

"My dear madam, if you will just consider the long journey, the——" Here he caught her eye, and wavered and quavered, and finally broke down. "Let me get you a glass of tea—that is—er—a cup of cha——Oh—er—a glass of—that is—I mean——" He faltered in a melancholy manner.

"Young man," said Miss MacGillicuddy sternly, "when you know what you *do* mean it will be high time to speak." She regarded him fixedly. "You do the part to perfection," she said; "if you had rehearsed it, it could not be better."

"The part?" stammered he.

"Ay—of a fool," said she.

This was terrible. Barry, entirely crushed, fell out of the conversation and sank into silence. He had, with much forethought, swallowed his champagne, and now trusted in providence that, in spite of his fatal speech, she would pass over the tumblers; though, as a rule, people do not take their tea out of them.

The discussion had, however, been of some use. It had given George time for action. Being a medical student of Trinity College, Dublin, he was naturally full of resource, and while his aunt was having this light and playful skirmish with Barry, he had made his way, unobserved even by her eagle eye, to the sideboard, had secured the champagne bottles, full and empty, had deposited them beneath a side-table with a napkin flung over them, and now stood before that side-table with arms folded calmly on his breast, prepared to sell his life as dearly as possible.

But Miss MacGillicuddy, being ignorant of the existence of those bottles, made no advance upon his quarter. Her whole energies were now concentrated upon Mrs. Dundas.

"Donna Dundas," said she, "what have you got in that tumbler?"

Donna looked pensively at her champagne.

"Lemonade," replied she, with great presence of mind, and as a preventative against further investigation she drank what remained in her glass.

"Humph!" said Miss MacGillicuddy. She now looked towards the head of the table, where Constantia sat, cold and terrified.

"Constantia," said she, "where did you get those strawberries?"

Constantia grew crimson, and then pale. Mr. Stronge hesitated. To say he sent them would get Constantia into dire disgrace; to refrain from speech placed all the onus on her. Once again, as hope seemed dead, Donna came to the rescue.

"I sent them," she said cheerfully. "Are they not fine? So early in the year, too. I quite pride myself upon them. If I were you I should try some. They would do you all the good in the world. They are very—cooling."

Miss MacGillicuddy glared at her, and Donna answered the glare with one of her most charming smiles.

"You look awfully queer," she said sweetly. "Do take my advice, and sit down and have a strawberry or two; Constantia's cream is excellent."

"Where is your husband?" demanded Miss MacGillicuddy, with a gasp.

"When last I saw him," responded Donna pleasantly, "he was still in the flesh—still a visitor upon this sordid earth; but that is many hours ago. Where he may be now, is unknown to me."

"Why is he not with you?"

"Ah!" said Donna, "now what a difficult question is that!—a conundrum almost. So many answers might be given to it; but I suppose one will suffice. I didn't want him."

"You are a wretched woman!" said Miss MacGillicuddy slowly, and with conviction.

Mrs. Dundas regarded her, first with curiosity, then with a careful reproach; after that she broke into one of her fits of silent laughter that, as a rule, were so aggravating to the one injured. It set the others off in spite of themselves. Even Constantia, with ruin, as it were, staring her in the face, gave way to prolonged and unseemly mirth. There is no knowing what Miss MacGillicuddy might not have

said or done at this culminating point, had not an interruption arrived.

It came in the shape of Mulcahy—a Mulcahy considerably the worse for a very enormous thimbleful, and with her cap all awry. It had fallen in an easy and graceful fashion over her right eye, and thus placed, greatly enhanced the original beauty of her features—which, however, were hardly Greek; at all events, not pure Greek. She advanced on Miss MacGillicuddy, who was stricken dumb by her appearance.

“Arrah! what ails ye at all?” began Mrs. Mulcahy, with a valour born of alcohol. “What the divil ails ye that ye should come back along home like this widdout a word o’ warnin’? Couldn’t ye have dhropt us a line, instead o’ comin’ sthraight in fist foremost to spile our nate little tay-fight? Fegs, ’tis a crooked way ye have wid ye when all’s tould! There they was all as merry as grigs, laughin’ till ye could hear ’em in the next county, an’ there you must choose to come down upon ’em (bad luck’s in the word), an’ freeze the blood in their veins. Wisha! ’twon’t thrive wid ye, an’ so I tell ye; an’ ’twas always a quare one you were, Miss MacGillicuddy, an’ that’s the sober truth.”

“Sober!” Miss MacGillicuddy repeated this word after her with terrific emphasis. “It was indeed timo I came home,” she said, in a low but ringing tone, “with rioting upstairs and drunkenness in the kitchen.”

“Who said that word?” cried Mulcahy, in a menacing tone. “Who said it, I ax? Where is he? Show him up to me. Projuce him.”

“I said it,” returned her mistress, with undiminished severity. “And now, Mulcahy—now, when I have caught you in the very act, as it were, when I hold you up to public condemnation, let no once more impress upon you the necessity for joining our victorious ranks, and adorning yourself with this.”

She detached from her own gown a morsel of blue ribbon, and held it out to the truculent Mulcahy. That unworthy woman spurned it from her with the utmost disdain.

"D'ye think I'd so demane meself?" said she, with withering scorn. "No, ma'am; keep your ribbon for yourself. An' 'tis sorry I am for ye." This last quite pathetically. Miss MacGillicuddy was plainly puzzled; she still held out the offending ribbon.

"Mulcahy, I command you to take it," said she.

"Command away," returned Mulcahy valiantly, whose thimbleful had now taken strong effect, and caused her to break all bounds. "But that blue rag I don't touch. I haven't fallen so low as that, the saints be praised."

"What do you mean, woman?" demanded Miss MacGillicuddy, with sudden indignation.

"Them as takes the pledge—*owns up*," returned Mulcahy, with deep solemnity. "Not that I blame ye, miss; far be it from me. 'Tis in the blood, I'm thinkin' There was the ould masther, an'——"

But the door closed upon her further revelations. Miss MacGillicuddy, fearful of her tongue, had pushed her outside the door and followed her into the hall, thus relieving those inside the room of her presence.

"Well, I expect now is our time for skedaddling," said Mrs. Dundas, rising with slow grace to her feet, and looking round to where Lord Varley was standing at the open window. He was outside still, but was leaning against the window-frame. "I shall walk," she said; "the evening is charming, and through the wood——"

"I am glad you have elected to go through my wood," said Featherston, in a calmly friendly way. "It will give me the opportunity of pointing out to you the special little points of interest on the coast below."

He turned to Constantia and took her hand, and pressed it very gently, and murmured something that brought a bright flush to her pretty cheek. Then he went back to Mrs. Dundas.

She had been watching him, and had been rather amused by Constantia's flush. So that was his little game! He would play fast and loose with her and with Constantia. She knew at that moment that she hated Featherston, and she therefore turned and

bestowed upon him a bewildering little smile, rich in friendliness.

"Come," she said, and stepped with him towards the window, which, as has been said, was almost level with the ground. Lord Varley was holding her parasol, and now handed her her gloves, and turned as if to accompany her. "Are you coming too?" she asked, with a gesture of surprise. "But this is *too* kind. It is altogether out of your way, Lord Varley, and—well, if you *will* come, it is kind, very kind. Good-bye, Connie. There could hardly have been a pleasanter afternoon, I think, specially the termination of it. Did you arrange it beforehand? If so, it was admirably clever; to spring upon us, without warning, a little comedy affair like that, was worthy of Toole himself. Good-bye again. Remember you are due to me when my guests arrive."

She stepped through the window, and accompanied by Varley and Featherston, turned a corner and was gone. Barry had arranged to walk home with Mrs. Blake, and soon they all disappeared. At the very last Stronge had torn himself away.

"I hope she won't be cross to you," he said diffidently to Constantia, as he held her hand at parting. He was alluding, of course, to Miss MacGillicuddy, and he really looked miserably apprehensive of the worst.

Constantia laughed.

"She will not murder me," she said. "You need not look like that. If—if you would like to be assured of that fact, you can come and see for yourself to-morrow whether I am or am not in the land of the living."

This, Stronge thought, was a marvellously kind permission, and he went away as happy a man as there was in Ireland then.

The three MacGillicuddys, Constantia, George, and Norah, when left alone, looked blankly one upon the other.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" exclaimed George, who was rich in a vocabulary that any costermonger might have envied.

"Just fancy her coming home like that!" said Constantia. "Was there ever any one like her?"

"Never, thank Heaven," responded George piously. "The thing now is to know what is the first thing to be done."

"Wash the glasses," said Norah, who was a careful young person of much promise.

"Good child!" said George approvingly. "And also to sequester the tell-tale bottles. Did any one notice the masterly manner in which I hid them away on her entrance? For that I deserve a vote of thanks. If I had lost my presence of mind then—if she had seen those fatal betrayers—I shudder to think where we now should be. In another world, beyond doubt."

"Oh, I saw you," cried Norah. "I was shivering with fright all the time. Just *think*, if she had turned her head! And Garrett Barry, did you notice him when Aunt Bridget attacked him? Oh, he was all of a twitter. Did you see him twitter, Con? No? Oh, it would have done your heart good!"

"And there was Donna," said George. "How on earth should we have managed but for her? Twice she came nobly to the rescue. When she said 'lemonade' that time, I could have kissed her."

"I couldn't," said Norah, pursing up her small mouth disdainfully. "I wouldn't kiss her for anything. She is a snake—with that red head of hers."

"Your knowledge of snakes is deep and profound, if a little startling," said George. "Where did you acquire it—from O'Grady? They say he has done all the East very conscientiously. Is it there that snakes are to be found with red hair?"

"Oh, stuff!" said Norah. She shrugged her shoulders at him, and then went on: "Well, of all that were here to-day," she said, "give *me* Mr. Stronge."

"I would, with pleasure," declared George. "But he is not for sale. He is ticketed. He is Connie's own. I say, Con, he couldn't take his eyes off you. Whatever fixed them there is beyond doubt the strongest cement known. He'd make a second fortune if he could only put it into small bottles and sell it. It

was tremendously funny to watch him. Mrs. Blake and I were delighted. I bet he knows how many eyelashes you have, and the exact number of times you smiled to-day. You've made your own of the blanket man."

"He is a regular dear," said Norah; "and I like him twice as well, now that I think he likes my Con."

"Andrew!" murmured George meditatively. "Andrew Stronge! In time, as I have already warned you, that will run to Andy. When one regards it all round, that simple name seems somewhat of a trial. And you'll have to do it, Con. Andrew would never draw the extra bob out of him. As his wife it will be your duty to call him by that small, endearing abbreviation."

"Well, I'd rather have him than Garrett, any day," exclaimed Norah, still on the defensive for Stronge.

"Better have neither," said Constantia, with a little uplifting of her chin.

"Sets the wind that way?" asked George, tilting the pretty chin still farther heavenward, with all a brother's gentleness, the better to see her face. "Is it that smooth-tongued Featherston, then? You know I said so.

"I know a young man fair to see—

Take care!

Trust him not, he is fooling thee—

Beware! beware!

It is my settled opinion, my good child, that your gentle Featherston is a hypocrite."

"So do I," cried Norah, for once in her life agreeing with George.

Constantia's face flamed.

"How mean it is to speak so behind his back!" she said. "Oh, it is abominable! You were fair enough to him when he was here, and now——"

Something rose in her throat that warned her to attempt no more at present.

"If it has gone as far as that," said George calmly, "all I can say is, keep your weather eye open; because it strikes me he is uncommonly spoony on Donna Dundas."

CHAPTER XII.

SHOWING HOW SHE MADE A MISTAKE, AND HOW HE DID NOT ENLIGHTEN HER.

It was a glorious night, as special as though it had been ordered with the supper and the band. Nature must have been in sympathy with Andrew Stronge when it accorded him such a moon for his entertainment.

It was quite a brilliant affair (the ball, not the moon, though it was brilliant too). Nearly all the county was present—the blankets having been forgiven for some time—and Mrs. Dundas, who wasn't in any way careful as to what she said, declared those who comprised it to be "the ugliest lot she had seen for quite a century or two."

Her own party mustered pretty strong. Her house just now, as she had hinted to Constantia would be the case, was filled with guests to overflowing. All this was rather a trial to Mr. Dundas, who was of a somewhat reserved and silent disposition; but as it pleased Donna, of course there was nothing to be said. He worshipped his lovely wife with an adoring passion, that was all the more intense because of its quietude, and the stern, calm nature of the man who felt it. He welcomed his guests with a kindly courtesy, and kissed his wife in a tenderly reassuring fashion when she hinted to him later on that "they were a dreadful bore to him, poor things."

There was a Sir Luke and Lady Golightly. An Hon. Bella Blair, who didn't seem to have anybody belonging to her—certainly nobody who had any concern for her behaviour. There were several unmarried men, and an Italian prince who was openly and miserably infatuated about his hostess.

This was terrible to the quiet country-side, which was only accustomed to legitimate flirtation, and was very often severe on that. They spoke of Mrs. Dundas and her Italian prince with bated breath; but Donna heard it all one way or another, and plucked

much enjoyment out of the whispering, and encouraged it, indeed, by a dexterous word let drop irrelevantly here and there. It was of use to her, this small gossip. Did it not draw off the eyes of the watching many from the constant attention of Lord Varley?

She was careful enough to let them see that she cared nothing for the silly passion of this Roman noble, and as she was rich and outwardly respectable, the world, even in that primitive spot, had shrewdness enough to know that it was their better part not to condemn her. Her house was full of young men, all apparently moneyed, and the mothers round there had many girls to marry.

After a bit, too, they condoned even the card-parties that were incessant at Ballymore, and for some time quite scandalised the neighbourhood. They were not so bad, of course, as the fact of a married woman having a lover, but they were bad enough, and matrons with sons quailed before them. But, after all, the interests of the daughters were paramount, and possible marriages lay in the entertainments at Ballymore, where the strange young men from the other side of the water congregated. If there were cards, there was also dancing, and an extreme and liberal hospitality; and the younger members of the austere county families declaring in favour of Donna, the elders gave way, and the possible iniquity was wisely pushed into the background, and consigned to silence.

This decision was helped by the discovery that play of a mild sort was, of late, largely patronised at Araglin. Indeed, it had become a rather distinct feature in the amusements there since—well, since the arrival of Mrs. Dundas in the neighbourhood. And if dear Lady Varley, who was quite all that any one should be, made no objection—why——!

Mild play! That was insisted upon. It was that in both houses, or else the boys and girls could not go. Sixpenny points, or so, at that good old Tory game, whist! They never went into the “or so,” which perhaps was fortunate for the junior members.

Everything at present, therefore, went on velvet

and as Mrs. Dundas entered Andrew Stronge's ball-room to-night, a silent ovation was accorded her—by the men. She looked superbly lovely, in a bright, sparkling style—animation being a chief charm of hers, and one that lifted her high above the usual run of faultless beauties. She was extraordinarily full of life; and every movement, gesture, or glance, betrayed it. To find a woman capable of being amused is much. To find one who can amuse is more. Mrs. Dundas to most men was amusing.

She was dressed in black lace—a rich, soft, clinging gown, that rendered her already perfect complexion even more dazzlingly fair. “*Le noir est flatteur pour les blondes.*” It made Mrs. Dundas like a bit of living marble, so purely white she shone, so exquisite were the long, shapely naked arms as they fell, now one, now the other, against her sides, upon the black delicate lace of her gown.

The women grew spiteful about her red hair, and strove diligently to think it hideous; but none of them honestly succeeded. They sneered at it to any men who chanced at the moment to be near them, and their tempers were not improved when their partners returned the sneer either with a glance of blank amazement or else a studied survey of the polished floor at their feet—and silence. It was impossible to decry her! She looked the very incarnation of youth and beauty—a very vision of loveliness, though perhaps of a rather unholy order. With all her vivacity, she was, too, very distinguished-looking, and had all the air and carriage of one well born, which of course came naturally to her, her birth being unimpeachable.

Just now she was standing in a recess, talking to Featherston. She was, as usual, animated; and Featherston, who was grave as a rule, was laughing.

“How full of life Mrs. Dundas seems!” said Lady Varley, glancing at O’Grady, who happened to be beside her. “It is a wonderful charm. When I see her, I envy her always more than any woman I know. She seems ever so entirely happy.”

O’Grady regarded her keenly. Why should there be envy? Did she guess? Was this an allusion to

Mrs. Dundas's charm for—— He checked his suspicion with a sense of heavy self-contempt as he gazed at the pure, calm face near him.

"To be always happy is to be without feeling," he said. "Mrs. Dundas, I should say, is so far fortunate; yet I think she misses a good deal. Ah! there goes some one of an exactly different mind."

He was indicating Constantia, who had come into the fuller light, and now stood for a moment looking at Mrs. Dundas, who was still talking in a soft, vivacious way to Featherston. The girl was dressed in a simple white gown, that hung in straight folds upon her, and that somehow suited her, in spite of its lack of fashionable frills and furbelows. A little colour crept into her face as she saw Featherston's undoubted enjoyment of Donna's somewhat racy conversation; and as she turned to pass on with her partner, who was Barry, the smile she gave to Lady Varley was slightly forced.

"You mean Constantia," said Lady Varley, answering O'Grady's last remark, as the girl went by them. She had grown very friendly with O'Grady of late; and indeed the distinguished Irish traveller was quite a favourite at Araglin, Lord Varley insisting upon his going there as often as was possible. "Yes, she is different. She is one in a thousand. I think, of all the women I know, I like her best. I have sometimes thought——"

She paused, and smiled softly at O'Grady.

"Well," said he, "what have you thought?"

"May I speak? You will not be angry? You have always been so kind to me that now I want to be kind to you. And Constantia too has been kind. Why should I not requite you both? And it would be such a happy thing, it seems to me."

"Yes—but what?" asked he, with some faint sense of amusement, not understanding her.

"That you should marry her! That she should love you! Ah! yes, that would be easy. There is no other one to whom I would so readily give her, and I think—I know—you would be quite, quite happy!"

She regarded him with her gentle eyes, and did not in the least understand why he shrank beneath her earnest gaze, and turned from her, and pretended such a sudden interest in a plant near him.

"You are not angry? You think, perhaps, I have interfered——"

"No. Oh no! It is not that, it is only that I shall never marry," replied he quickly.

"But——"

"And besides," he was laughing now, though his face was a little pale, "if I were to dare to think of Miss MacGillicuddy, what do you think would be my end? How should I escape the vengeance of those already in the field? Is it my death you are seeking? Think of Barry's mighty fist, of our host's superior weight."

"Ah, I see," said she, regarding him with gentle sympathy, "there is some one else, somewhere. I am sorry I spoke to you; but you will pardon that, and—and I hope it will be well with you some day."

O'Grady's brows contracted.

"You don't know what you are saying," he exclaimed, rather brusquely

CHAPTER XIII.

SHOWING HOW A RED WITCH WORKED HER WICKED SPELLS
BY MOONLIGHT.

It was, as has been said, a glorious night. The heavens were bright with stars. Outside, in the perfumed darkness of the gardens, a light breeze, flower-scented, was rustling through the trees; a dainty wind, soft as a heralding breath from the summer, now so near.

The silver moon hung high in the vast dome; "a dewy freshness filled the silent air;" from the woods beyond, a sleepy, tremulous cooing, as of many birds, stole on the senses. Here and there coloured

lamps gleamed through the dusky veil that covered all things, lighting up the gleaming limbs of statues, or throwing a sparkling radiance upon the water that dripped from the fountains.

Low seats were arranged in subtle corners to tempt the unwary into the meshes of that dangerous game, flirtation; and through the open windows the sound of the sad, soft music was wafted out to those who sought the coolness of the night air.

Mrs. Dundas, slowly descending the steps that led from the conservatory to the sward beneath, glanced upwards, as though struck by the brilliancy of the sailing moon; perhaps it was to show the purity of the lines of her throat and neck. Fair as these were undoubtedly, the heavens were fairer still, and full of a strange, mysterious power. The sense of farness, the awful calm, the serenity, the eternal silence—all seemed to descend suddenly, and make the heart stand still within its bosom, as the vast grandeur of it made itself felt, and sank into the soul. The terrible immovability would have been unbearable, save that sometimes a pale cloud stole over the radiant moon, and sometimes a star shot across the sky, leaving for an instant a trail of fire behind it.

"He has behaved to us pretty well about the night," said Mrs. Dundas, with a complacent and complimentary glance around her; and another cast backwards, over her shoulder, at her companion, Lord Varley. She was alluding to her host.

"Why take that tone? Have his other arrangements failed to please you?" His manner was cold, and slightly combative.

"On the contrary; everything is as perfect as a *nouveau riche* would be safe to have it. The mayonnaise was beyond praise, and for once it is impossible to cavil at the champagne. Coronis says——"

"It can scarcely matter what he said," interrupted Varley, with a sneer. Coronis was the name of the Italian prince who wasted so much adoration on Mrs. Dundas. "A poor beggar like that, who lives, or starves rather in that empty palace of his in Rome,

commits an imprudence when he criticises the arrangements of a house like this."

Mrs. Dundas cast a swift glance at him from under her long lashes. The fact that he was with difficulty restraining an outbreak of temper, caused her some amusement. That jealousy of the Italian's attentions to her, had created the temper, caused her delight.

"Oh! it matters to me," she said sweetly. "His opinion is something, at least in my eyes! You forget he is my friend—poor though he may be."

"Only a friend?" asked he insolently.

She laughed. Another woman in all probability would never have forgiven him this speech—or rather the meaning of it—but Donna was above all such weakness. The only pride she knew was in the accomplishment of the ends she had in view, and so she laughed lightly and easily.

"My lover, you mean? Well, yes. He makes that apparent enough, poor man. But an accepted one, which you also meant? No. He is a very great nuisance, and almost a folly, I admit, but he is amiable, and handsome, and he has his uses."

"Dundas seems wonderfully complaisant."

"My husband is fully aware, Lord Varley, that his honour is safe in my keeping!" She uttered this dignified assurance with quite a grand air, but as she did so, she made a saucy little *moue* for Lord Varley's benefit, and a mocking gleam full of wicked merriment lit her eyes. She lifted her shoulders, gave herself a hug full of enjoyment, and shut up her fan with a little sharp snap, a trick she had learned abroad. Then it was all over, and she was looking at Varley once again, in her would-be demure way, with a mischievous smile upon her lips. Varley gave her no smile in response. That sudden bit of acting had occasioned him no mirth; had rather deepened his anger into passion. And she looked so lovely there, in the moonlight, with that wild light in her lustrous eyes, and her soft, naked arms, and——

"If I were your husband I should kill you!" he said hoarsely.

"It suggested itself to me—that," returned she audaciously, "many a month ago. So long ago, indeed, as when we were together in Italy. You remember? And yet, Varley," she drew closer to him, and laid the feathered tip of her fan upon his arm, "and yet, had we been married, you would have had no reason for the slaying of me. Where I loved, I should not be false."

Her tones had grown tremulous; the smile had died from her, and all her exquisite face was quivering with a feeling she took no pains to suppress.

"False!" said Varley. "That is a matter not to be gone into; the real question is, could you be true? You speak of those far-off days—in Italy—when you were mine in heart and soul, as I madly believed, and when——" He paused abruptly. "Pshaw!" he said, with a frown.

"Well? But—— Go on," she entreated gently.

"What need is there to go on? What is there left to be said?"

"Nothing, perhaps. Except—that you forsook me."

"None of that, Donna!" His face was stern and pale, as he looked at her with flashing eyes. "Delude the rest of the world if you will, but do not waste your powder upon me. I know you."

"Yet it is the truth I speak," declared she quickly. "Were you not the one to cry off, to draw back, to leave me? And all for a cause so trivial."

"Trivial! when the man was making love to you before my eyes—when I was openly discarded for him?"

"Yet I could have married him, and did not. Yes, it was trivial; it was selfish!" she said, with superb contempt. "You would have denied me such a small amusement for the sake of your *amour propre*. You cast me off because of it; me, whom you professed to hold so dear! Pouf! a murrain upon such love, cry I!"

"I did then, what I should do now."

"The opportunity happily is denied you," retorted she, a trifle bitterly. She drew back from him, and

angry line about her lips; and then all suddenly her mood changed from scorn to a soft, seductive tenderness.

"Freddy!" she whispered. A sigh broke from her parted lips. The old fond name fell on the passing breeze, and all at once the air seemed full of it, and of more than it; of orange-groves, and moonlit terraces, and love, and light, and joy.

"Why should we quarrel?" she said. "Have I not cause against you, and—*yes*—not another angry word now! You have *your* cause, too, doubtless. But shall we not forgive? Has there been no punishment meted out to me, as well as to you? Ah! let cold words die between us two, now we are once more——"

"What?" demanded he unsteadily.

"Together!" she murmured softly; "together, and——"

"And?"

"Lovers!" The word broke from her like a sigh. Her breath came quickly through her parted lips. The moon shining on her head, turned her hair to threads of living gold. She put up her long white arms, that gleamed snow-white, to push back her hair from either side of her head, and kept them thus upraised, as she looked straight at him with soft entreaty in her eyes.

She could see the effort with which he withstood her—the restraint he placed upon himself in this, his last struggle to remain (at least in act) faithful to the woman he had married. She marked all, and felt only a fresh access of desire to obtain the mastery.

She let her arms drop slowly to her sides.

"You have not forgotten," she said, "you remember all, and yet—what holds you from me? Let the past die! What good is there in anything for joy or grief, when the ashes are scattered, and lie on the path behind us? To-day alone is ours. Take the sweet present, Varley—take it, when I give it."

She held out her hands. She moved as if to go to him. The darkness of the night lay around their feet, though the moon illumined her lovely face,

and as she took a step forward, she felt herself checked by the root of an old elm-tree that had grown upwards and crossed the path. She swayed a little. Involuntarily Varley sought to save her, and in a moment she was lying in his arms.

She was close in his embrace. Alas! it was not for the first time, and he knew the sweetness of it! His heart seemed to stop beating.

"You are not hurt?" he whispered, bending over her.

"No; oh no." The answer came to him a little indistinctly, and a soft, tremulous breath seemed to pass through her. She was within his arms, and now the agitation was at an end, yet she made no effort to free herself. She did not even stir. She lay there contentedly, and presently let her head drop slowly backwards until it lay upon his breast, and she could turn up to his her large, lustrous eyes in the seductive moonlight.

An odd expression grew on Varley's face. He had not meant to hold her thus. So far he had been loyal to his wife, in as much as deeds count, but now——. Her bold, beautiful eyes seemed to burn into his, and draw them down to her. He could feel her breath upon his cheek; the little fond yet half-mocking smile that widened her red lips could be so plainly seen.

If she had been an acquaintance of a year ago—six months ago—one known but yesterday as it were, it might have been all different; but oh, those old past days, so full of life—those days that *will not* die; the memory of them dwelt so near the surface that a touch, a glance recalled them.

Again they are floating on the Maggiore—the oars idle, the arms that should have laboured at them wound round her. As she is lying now, so she had lain upon his breast a score of times in that soft, rose-hued past, her fingers twined in his, their hearts beating in unison to one same sweet tune. Almost he can hear the rhythmical rise and fall of the oars of the other boats, so far away as to leave him and her in a blest solitude. He can hear, too, the faint splashing

of the sparkling water-drops, the sound of voices singing, now coming, now going—swelling—dying.

He started violently. All at once he came back to the life he was now leading—the life chosen. He remembered how things were with him, and Yolande's pale, grave face (so unlike the brilliant, laughing one now looking into his) rose before him. With a slight shudder he threw up his head, and turned his glance from the warm gaze riveted upon him.

Marking the shudder (which, indeed, ran through her), and feeling his arms loosen round her supple form, Donna, with a swift, lithe turn of her body, so moved herself that now her cheek lay pressed to his, and, lifting one hand, slowly, *slowly*, she laid it upon his throat. Very delicately it crept ever upwards, this small, clinging, devilish little hand, now with the fingers closed, now opening, until at last her naked arm had risen with it, and had formed a soft, warm, palpitating necklet round him.

The magic worked. He drew her to him. Once again his eyes sought hers, and then once again he remembered. If he fell now, he fell for ever, and he knew it. He lifted both his arms, and, taking hers, resolutely pushed her backwards, still holding her.

“Have you no heart—no conscience?” he said.

“Conscience! No.” She shook her head deliberately. She felt the game was won, as she looked into his wild eyes, and triumph made her reckless. “Heart! Yes—for you!”

“Think of Dundas!”

She laughed softly, merrily, with uplifted brows; a laugh full of music.

“And you to call yourself my friend!” she whispered gaily. “What have I done to you, then, that you should compel me to call to mind that amiable misfortune?”

“Do you know what you are doing?” asked he, still holding her from him.

“What *am* I doing, then?” she laughed again. “That question should be to you. Do not put little red marks upon my arms, Freddy, for all the world to

see. You ask me why I do not think of Mr. Dundas. Are *you* thinking of Lady Varley?"

She was reckless indeed, and sure of the end, when she said that.

"Leave Lady Varley out of it," commanded he, in a low, vehement tone.

As he spoke, he shook her slightly.

"Ay, gladly!" whispered she. Her eyes took fire again. She had been standing erect, drawing herself, as it were, away from his masterful grasp; but now she gave in to it. She leant towards him; her lips trembled. "Let her go—let all the world go," she breathed passionately, "so long as you and I—are left—to love——"

The victory was hers! The arms that had tried to hold her from him, now fastened round her. They drew her closer—closer still. Their lips met.

A slight sound roused them from the mad joy they felt. It had lasted, altogether, but a minute or two, and now it was at an end; but it had changed the course of many lives.

"We had forgotten," said Donna, drawing herself quickly from his arms. "The world as yet is peopled. You heard a sound. Come."

She threw herself into a little stilted society attitude, and moved towards the house. Varley, unable to bring himself back from that past sad dream of love as quickly as she, walked beside her in a silence he could not break.

Donna, on the contrary, seemed gay with life, and full of a vivacity as real as it was reckless. She chattered to him unceasingly, and rallied him on his silence, and laying her hand lightly, delicately, upon his arm, glanced up at him every now and then with that fond, sweet smile on her lips, that then in the old days, as now, belonged to him alone. He knew that, and seemed, silent as he was, to care for nothing else. Her touch thrilled him. He hardly heard or heeded her light banter, the voice that spoke being so sweet. He had given himself up to her. His day of grace was past.

As they drew near the lighted windows, Mrs. Dundas stopped suddenly and looked up at a balcony that overhung the nearer garden, where a tall figure leant upon the balustrade.

"Good heavens! There is my old man," exclaimed she. "I must *run*." Her tone was slightly alarmed, yet comical. She made a movement as if to go in another direction. But Varley stopped her.

"He has seen you," he warned her in a low tone.

A second glance at the tall figure on the balcony convinced her of this, and instantly she changed her tactics, turned once more to the house, and threw into her whole air quite an excess of joyousness. Meantime she told Varley to leave her.

"You to the right about, I to the front," she said, with a little grimace, and then went leisurely across the moonlit space alone, and ran up the stone steps that led to the balcony. As she reached the top and saw Dundas she started very naturally, and let an expression full of delighted surprise cross her face.

"You!" she cried gladly, and came to him, with loving eyes, and parted, smiling lips.

"Yes," he said, and drew her to him, and gazed with a grave rapture into the exquisite upturned face. She was beautiful, truly, and she was his! He loved her with a passion, the depth of which he hardly understood himself. She was his sole joy, the one delight of a life that up to fifty had been singularly solitary.

"And what are you doing here, you bad, bad boy?" she went on in a soft, purring tone, giving his tie a little pull this way and that, as if to arrange it. She put her head on one side to mark the effect of her meddling. "Trying to catch cold, eh? And when you know I have forbidden you, on pain of death, to seek the air at midnight."

"It was so warm," returned he, quite apologetically. It was so sweet to him to hear her scold him for this little act of imprudence; to know himself so dear to her.

"Tut! Nonsense! Warm? Feel me!" She was still prettily scolding; and as she spoke she lifted a

cool, slim hand, and drew it in a slow, caressing fashion across his brow. He caught it and pressed it to his lips with a vehement fondness—with all the ardour of a new-born lover.

"My own wife!" he breathed, in a low, eager whisper. His usually austere face grew bright as he gazed at her. There was deep thankfulness, and a certain pride in it. "How is it that I have been so blest above my fellows," he asked her, "as to gain your love? And not a little of it—not a part—but *all* the love of your sweet life!"

She laughed—she seemed thoroughly amused. She placed one finger beneath his chin, and looked at him archly.

"You would have compliments, then? But not one—not *one*, I tell you, to-night! Is it not enough that I should waste all my precious time here alone with a foolish old husband simply because—well, because I'm happier here—whilst there within," pointing airily to the ball-room beyond, "all my many swains are searching for me high and low? Is that nothing to you, sir?" Here she changed her position slightly, so as to get a better view of his face. "Tell me," she went on lightly; "you saw me coming here a moment since?"

"I *felt* your coming, even more than I saw it. You stood in shadow, and your gown is black, but yet I knew you. I should know you amongst ten thousand. Were I lying in my grave and you drew near—you remember those lines, sweetheart? They haunt me always. 'My heart would know it and beat, had it lain for a century dead.' Oh, yes, I saw you. Who was that with you?"

"Captain Craddock," returned she easily, running her cheek softly up and down against his sleeve.

"I thought it was Varley."

"Well, do you know I've often said it——"

"Said what?"

"There is a wonderful similarity between those two men."

"A likeness, yes, perhaps. But certainly one should give the palm to Varley."

"Ye-es," indifferently, "I dare say."

"I am glad it was not Coronis," said Mr. Dundas, after a slight pause.

"Oh, that absurd patriot! Do you think I would fling away an hour on him? *Pas si bête*. By-the-bye, when does he leave? He grows insufferably dull."

"He grows troublesome. He makes the idle tongues round here wag; and I wish no silly talk about my wife." He utters the last two words with the utmost tenderness.

"I think I hate Coronis," cried she petulantly; "he makes you unkind to me."

"Unkind, Donna?"

"Yes, terribly unkind. You are scolding me now because that odious man fancies himself hopelessly attached to me. As if that was my fault."

"When have I accused you of a fault? Where *is* the fault in you? And as to scolding, that is a little unjust, is it not?"

"Well, *there's* a fault," cried she gaily, tapping him on the chest. "You have accused me of injustice. Now I've caught you, eh?" She had thrown off the vague suspicion of ill-humour of a moment since, and was now all life and smiles again. "And as for your scoldings, you tyrant—bah!" She snapped her fingers at him. "If all these silly fellows who run after me annoy you, why, that is part of the burthen you must bear—a little of the price to be paid for having married a lovely woman like me."

She threw up her head and darted a saucy glance at him. He laughed, as she meant he should.

"And, after all," whispered she, nestling closer to him, "what does it all—what does anything matter, so long as we love each other, you and I?"

"Nothing, indeed," returned he with some emotion. "To know that you are entirely mine in heart and feeling makes me as a king, above all others. Not to many, I believe, is it granted to have so supreme a trust in anything mortal as I have in you. If I were deprived of that, my life would be savourless; it might go when it would—it could be of no further value to me. But it will not go. As for Coronis, you

fancy me annoyed about his too evident admiration ; but it is only for your sake I care. Beauty has need to be very guarded, so swift, so undying is the hatred it engenders—as well as the love ! I would guard you from even the faintest sting of scandal. And this Italian—— No ; I trust you.”

“ You say that over often, I think,” said she, with a pensive uplifting of her brows.

“ Do I ? ” He smiled again, and patted her cheek indulgently, as if a little amused by her pique. “ Well, I won’t do it again.”

“ What ! not trust me ? ”

“ Always *that*,” with a return to his gravity ; “ but of this Coronis I would speak. You need not fear my being uncivil to him, your guest—he is harmless, he may go ; but avoid public censure. He is only a handsome fool, who could have no influence over you——”

He paused ; his grasp tightened unconsciously upon her arm, and into his eyes came a fierce light. Donna moved a little beneath his touch.

“ You are thinking ? ” she suggested calmly.

“ A mad thought—an unnatural one ! ” He drew his breath sharply, and his grasp loosened on her arm—the round, perfect arm, the smooth whiteness of which was just a little damaged by the pressure of his fingers. She refrained, however, from even a glance at it.

“ Come—your thought ? ” she persisted playfully.

“ Influence ! ” He had in part forgotten her again, and had gone back to his first disturbing idea. “ If,” he said slowly, bending his stern gaze on her, “ the time ever came for me to find some one who could thus influence you—I should shoot him as I would a dog ! ”

Donna laughed lightly ; but as she did so she felt her blood run cold within her veins, and was conscious of a quick shiver that chilled her.

“ A terrible threat,” she said gaily. “ Let us be thankful that it must perforce be an idle one. Ah ! what a solemn face to turn to his lovely wife ! Come, then, a smile to reassure her.”

In her grace, her beauty, her devilry, she was irresistible. Mr. Dundas forgot his moody reflections, and, with a sharp sigh, banished them.

"Don't assassinate the poor prince quite yet," she said, with a charming grimace; "think of what a bore, an expense, it would be to forward his long body to Rome to repose in the tomb of his mouldy ancestors. Spare him yet awhile; if we go abroad in the autumn, you can do it then far more cheaply. And now, indoors with you; these moonlight flittings are bad for your morals. In with you, I say. Ah! a moment; I had almost forgotten. In the garden just now I thought of you (when, indeed," with a delicious little touch of heartfelt sentiment, "do I *not* think of you?), and I plucked you this flower."

She went up to him, and having detached a rosebud (given her by Varley) from her bosom, arranged it carefully in his buttonhole.

"For you!" she said coquettishly, stepping back as if to admire her handiwork, and lifting gay, saucy, laughing eyes to his. "For your own self! From your own Donna!"

CHAPTER XIV.

SHOWING HOW STRONGE BECAME WEAK; AND HOW CONSTANTIA, THOUGH SORELY TROUBLED, HELD HER OWN THROUGH TWO ENCOUNTERS.

THE sound that had startled Varley and Mrs. Dundas out of their love-trance, had come from a source little dreamed of by them. As they hurried towards the house, the veil of evergreens behind where they had stood was lightly thrust aside, and the moonbeams revealed the pale, startled face of Constantia MacGillicuddy.

She looked so white, so horrified, that Stronge, who was with her, thought she was going to faint. She had witnessed that last scene—the wild embrace,

the swift and guilty separation. It had been a sudden awakening, a first glimpse into the hateful side of life, its lawlessness, its vile treachery.

It had all happened in a moment, and when Stronge had realised the meaning of the picture before him, it was too late to prevent Constantia's realising also. She looked straight at him now with a very anguish of distress in her eyes, and tried to say something, but could not. There was a touch of shame about her, that made him wretched. If he could only have looked back at her with a glance sufficiently unconscious as to convince her that he had seen nothing, and that she was alone in her knowledge of the odious discovery she had just made, he felt matters would be easier for her. But he could not do it. Her clear eyes read him through and through.

A sense of savage anger rose within him, that she should have been subjected to such an ordeal; that her pure, strong, childish nature should have been thus roughly roused to a knowledge better left unlearned. It was a thoroughly unfortunate affair altogether, but there was at least a little grain of comfort to him in the thought, that if she *was* to witness such a disgraceful thing, he should have been her companion.

"Yes, I saw all," he said, involuntarily making answer to the unspoken question in her frightened eyes.

"Oh, it is horrible!" said Constantia, with a violent shudder. "Oh! how can it be true? And Lady Varley——"

"Come and sit down here," said Stronge, drawing her towards a garden chair. He could see that she was trembling. "And do not think so much of it. I am sorry from my soul that you should have been here, but——"

"What does it matter about me?" cried she impatiently. "Do not think of me at all. Think of Lady Varley. Oh, poor thing! And her little baby so ill. His baby, too. And he——"

"Is the child ill?"

"It is always ailing, and now it is worse. It is

dying, I think, but she will not believe it. But you will see how unhappy she must be, and now *this*. If it should come to her ears, if—— Oh!" cried she, clasping her hands, "if I were a man I should like to *kill him*."

Her face was deadly pale in the moonlight; her lips quivering. Stronge felt the blood grow warm about his heart. He asked himself at this moment whether it were not his duty, as a true lover, to obey even her vaguest wish. Why not throw Lord Varley's falseness in his teeth, and——

"As for her," said Constantia in a low tone, between her teeth—she was looking straight before her, she had apparently forgotten Stronge—"I shall let her know," she said; "I shall certainly speak to her."

"To Lady Varley?" asked he in dismay.

"Lady Varley! No! But to her, Mrs. Dundas! My—my cousin." She seemed to shrink from the word. "She shall know at least what I think of her. I shall compel her to listen. She shall give up all thoughts of Lord Varley. Oh, Mr. Stronge!" cried she, turning to him with flushed cheeks, "you do not know, perhaps, that she was once engaged to him. They were lovers; they quarrelled; they both married; and yet now! Oh, it is *terrible*! And she is my cousin. I feel as if I, through her, were injuring Lady Varley. Was there ever anything so disgraceful, so wicked?" She paused nervously, and then suddenly burst into tears. "Oh!" she sobbed miserably, "I wish—I *wish* I had not seen it."

"So do I from my heart, my poor child," said Stronge earnestly. He drew her towards him impulsively, and she leant her forehead against his arm, and cried there until her agitation grew milder. It did not seem strange to her that she should thus lean upon him; her mind was entirely absorbed with her grievous discovery. But Andrew Stronge comprehended the meaning of her indifference to his presence, and the grasp of despair tightened on his heart.

"You will be sensible," he said presently; "you will not speak to Mrs. Dundas to-night; you will wait for a good opportunity, and then do what you can. Promise me this."

"Well, yes, it shall be as you wish." She sighed heavily, but her sobs ceased, and she dried her eyes, and drew herself up to her full height, and began to wish she hadn't been so absurd. She remembered that Stronge had had his arm round her, and that she had cried upon his shoulder; she blushed crimson, and a pang of fear shot through her. What would—she checked this thought, and blushed even deeper in doing so—what would any one think of her, could they know of it?

She felt unreasonably angry with Stronge, but the anger died as she raised her eyes, most reluctantly, to his. Who could be angry with that grave, kindly, anxious face? She turned away, and let her gaze descend upon the gravel at her feet, and slowly, thoughtfully, drew her fan through her fingers.

"I am tired," she said wearily. "Let us go back to the house."

They entered it by the armoury door; the hall inside was brilliantly lit by lamps with blood-red shades, and a subdued crimson glow was the consequence. It lit up the faces round with a warm radiance. Almost the first person Constantia saw on entering was Donna Dundas, the second was Featherston. Not that they were together; Donna was smiling with quite an ineffable sweetness at the Italian, Coronis, and Featherston was leaning against the opposite wall. His eyes were on her.

There were, however, so many other people in the small stone hall, that Constantia, bewildered at first by the bright glow, did not see where Featherston's gaze dwelt. A moment later he had roused himself, and was coming towards her.

"Our dance, I think," he said coldly.

She started. Had so much time flown? Had she indeed missed one of the dances she most desired?

"You had forgotten," went on Featherston, quite stiffly now. It is abominable to a man to find

himself forgotten even for an instant by the woman who, he believes, loves him. "It hardly matters now," he said. "It is almost at an end."

Constantia grew pale. That first glance at the gay, smiling Donna had unnerved her; and now his coldness gave a finishing touch to the suppressed agitation that was troubling her.

"It was not that I forgot," she said, "only——" She hesitated. How could she go on? How explain?

"'Only.' Quite so," responded he, with a half-veiled sneer, and a glance at Stronge, who was not heeding him, but was rather regarding Mrs. Dundas with an amazed scrutiny. Had the woman no conscience—no heart? Here she was laughing, glowing, in all the insolence of her beauty, unmindful of that late scene in the garden that had crushed Constantia. She was making herself adorable to half-a-dozen admirers; notably to Coronis. She had even condescended to go farther afield, and had drawn young George MacGillicuddy into her net. The boy was leaning over her in an attitude of exaggerated devotion.

Barry, however, held aloof from the siren of the hour. His manner did not exactly convey the idea that he was against her, but he certainly was not on her side. Constantia noted this, and was in a manner glad of it, though an instant later even this comfort forsook her; Barry, seeing her, turned upon her a scowling brow, and a glance full of concentrated wrath and reproach. It was a momentary gleam; it disappeared again as he went back to his conversation with Mrs. Ronayne-Power, a little woman with sharp, refined features, and a reputation for saying such nasty things of her neighbours, that she was immensely petted by them in consequence.

"Not a bit of it," she was saying now, in her clear, staccato voice that always made itself heard, *à propos* of the latest married scandal in the county. "There was no hurry about it. She was never in a hurry, if you remember. It appears that as far back as last January, she had all her arrangements made for the elopement with the major, even to the

giving away of her old things. She had had an entirely new trousseau ordered for him, though the first was only three years old. However, at the last moment, her husband, as you know, got the small-pox."

"Anything so considerate!" murmured Donna.

"Inconsiderate, she thought it, as she had a trumpety sort of a conscience somewhere. She was good-natured, always, and she made up her mind to give him a final spell of nursing before deserting him for ever; she therefore told Major Blackwood she could not possibly start on her honeymoon with him, until she had seen the old man safely through his illness."

"And the major, of course, very wisely declined to go a-honeymooning with a young woman fresh from a tainted atmosphere," put in Donna flippantly.

"Oh, as for a taint more or less," said Mrs. Ronayne-Power, with a shrug of her shoulders, "that could hardly harm her. She was well enough off in that line. As for Major Blackwood, you wrong him. He was so infatuated by that little wretch, that he declared publicly he envied her husband his small-pox, considering she was going to nurse him. And nurse him she did, night and day; got highly complimented by the physicians for her wifely devotion, was held up to the entire parish by the rector as a sample of what a woman should be; and the very morning she got her husband downstairs for the first time as a convalescent, she made a clean bolt of it with the major."

"Bless my stars!" exclaimed Barry. "It is the oddest thing I ever heard of, if it happened—so. She is a regular heroine."

"Of a rather irregular story," put in Stronge, who was annoyed.

"A Christian martyr in my estimation," said Donna, with a yawn.

Quite a little concert of praise and blame arose, that Featherston, in his usual cynical way, brought to an end.

"There isn't a sound idea in the whole of that

tale," he said languidly. "Not one, I assure you. I should know."

"Why should you know?" demanded Barry, with studied politeness but a truculent eye. He was in the mood just then that made him intolerant to any man upon whom Constantia might have chanced to cast a favouring eye.

"For various reasons," returned the other coolly. "At all events, I know this much: that she left her husband, not because of his years, or the major, but because she had been delicately reared and she couldn't stand snuff. He took it by the spoonful, I'm told; she is now living—*by herself*, recollect—somewhere on the Riviera."

"I'm glad she chose a nice quiet spot, where English tourists don't intrude," said Donna, making a faint grimace.

"Do you mean to say she hasn't gone off at all?" asked a pretty woman, leaning forward out of the background; she seemed interested, and in a degree disappointed. She was thinking of going off herself, and was grieved in that she could not count on some one who had given her a lead.

"Be comforted. She has," said Mrs. Ronayne-Power, with a sneer. "If not in a coach and four with her major, at least in her good looks. I saw her just before she started for that solitary trip to the Riviera that good Mr. Featherston would persuade us about, and her neck was a perfect picture—of bones. It was at Lady Vaughan's, and all the men fought shy of her. One couldn't wonder. She was so thin that I should think it would hurt one to dance with her. Even Massereene—you know the sort of man he is, and the sort of woman he likes—even he never went near her all the night."

"What luck for her!" said Stronge, in a peculiar tone.

"I saw her, too," cried Barry, laughing; "when you spoke of bones I remembered. She was the woman 'mit nodings on' who danced all night with Petersham, and who——"

"Sh! No! Put your head in a bag," whispered the pretty woman, nudging him cautiously; "that was Mrs. Burke, cousin of Featherston's. You'll let yourself in for something if you don't look out."

"In spite of the bones, the major was faithful," went on Mrs. Ronayne-Power, with a view to crushing Featherston's view of the scandal.

"There is nothing like constancy," said George MacGillicuddy, with a fond glance at Donna.

"Nothing, indeed. It is the rarest virtue we have," agreed Featherston, directing a withering one at Constantia, who met it and replied to it silently but eloquently. Her large eyes filled with tears.

"Well, I guess I must be going," said the pretty woman, rising to her feet. She had a lovely figure, so she rose slowly. "My old Dragon is disgracefully lively to-night, so I must be on the move. I had hoped the lobster mayonnaise and the dry Monopole would have been too much for him, but he has survived all, and is now considerably on the champ. Good night, good folks. Better luck next time—for *me*, at all events."

"I say! Don't go yet," said Mrs. Ronayne-Power persuasively. She knew there would be a row if the pretty woman stayed, so she did her best to keep her.

"Tisn't good enough!" said the pretty woman, with a faint laugh. "Last time I tried that on, the consequences were gruesome. I dare say," carelessly, "you all remember. I flatly refused to move upon the homeward track, whereupon that dear old thing whose name I bear, hauled me off my seat before an appreciative audience! To risk it again would mean murder."

"Oh, he wouldn't go so far as that!" said Mrs. Ronayne-Power reassuringly.

"No, but *I* should. As it is," with a languid smile, "I expect he has hauled me off my seat for good and all. I shan't resume it." She nodded briskly all round, and, escorted by a man on her left, strolled out of sight.

Donna looked after her with an inscrutable smile upon her lips. "What a fool that woman was! Could

she not manage her little affairs with more decency than that? Cajolery! Had she no knowledge of the unlimited power of that great agent?"

She, too, rose.

"This dance is now almost at an end," she said, "so I presume I may in safety return to the ball-room. I was engaged for it to some half-dozen or so, so thought it wise to go into retirement until it blew over. Mr. Barry, you will give me your arm?"

She smiled winningly upon him. She preferred Barry at this moment to any other man, because she could see he did not prefer her in any way.

Featherston, as if nettled, turned aside. He had approached her by a foot or so, as if to speak, but now he drew back. He went up to Constantia instead. It seemed to him on the instant that the innocent, unsophisticated girl was infinitely the more desirable of the two.

"As we missed that last dance," he said, with a friendly smile, "I hope you will give me this instead. It is only a square dance, indeed; but still half a loaf, you know, is better—*sometimes*—than no bread."

Constantia crimsoned and then grew pale. She clasped her hands nervously.

"I am so sorry," she stammered; "but—but I have promised it to——"

"I see," interrupted he coldly. "You are determined, then, to deny me! No, do not trouble yourself to explain who it is. I can understand. But to be cast aside for him a second time to-night seems——"

"You are wrong," she cried eagerly; "quite wrong. This dance belongs to Mr. Dundas. He does not dance anything except the squares, and his asking me was such a special sort of thing that——"

Stronge, who was standing at a distance, could see but not hear, and he hoped honestly that those apparently angry words would end in a settled coldness. But, even as he hoped, he knew it was in vain. Featherston had met the girl's anxious eyes, had seen the tears in them (raised by him for the second time), and had been subdued thereby. There was always something about Constantia that held him captive *au*

fond, however his thoughts might wander (occasionally and most unworthily) here and there, amongst the more experienced beauties of his world.

He bent over her now, and his voice sank to a whisper—a rather loving one.

“You have been unkind,” he said; “you must acknowledge that. And yet—I believe you!”

Constantia smiled at him through her tears; to speak was beyond her. She knew that she was unutterably happy; she felt that he had forgiven her. And he looked so handsome, so aristocratic; his eyes were so full of feeling, his nose so ducal, that she knew she was right in being happy. And yet why did he haunt the footsteps of Mrs. Dundas? Why did he so often look at her? Garrett Barry, Mr. Stronge—they did not show the reigning beauty such open devotion. And yet how superior he was to either of them! He had seemed eager to make up the small quarrel with her (Constantia), and yet, did he love her? Did—did she love him?

She fell into a sound sleep that night, without answering either question.

CHAPTER XV.

SHOWING HOW MORNING SERVICE WAS CONDUCTED IN THE OLD PARISH CHURCH OF CARMEEN; AND WHAT STRANGE MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS WERE USED THEREIN.

THE following Sunday Constantia rose with alacrity, and donned her prettiest gown, which was becoming, though decidedly elderly; still, she looked well in it, which compensated for many things. Her eyes were bright, her lips smiling, as she surveyed herself in her glass. She listened to Norah's fond ravings with a benign expression. To-day she would see Featherston!

There was never any doubt of that! He was a good man, whose pew never knew him absent; and his very pose, the devotional bend of his body, the

strict watch his eye kept upon his prayer-book as though fearing anything in it might escape him, endeared him to the rector, and raised him in the minds of all—notably of Lord Killeens, who always made a point of tucking his arm into Featherston's after service, and tottering down the gravelled walk with him, maundering about the chances for and against Home Rule. In spite of his age and senility, he had considerable influence, and a would-be M.P. could see many reasons for posing creditably before him, and listening without signs of weariness to the maundering.

It was a heavenly day just bordering upon June. Inside the church, indeed, the heat was almost oppressive. Some of the windows wouldn't open at all, and the rest only about half-an-inch or so, the consequence being that presently everybody felt a little stifled. Mrs. Dundas waved a huge fan vigorously to and fro, and made private bets with herself as to how long Miss MacGillicuddy would sustain her rigid position without so much as winking an eyelid. She varied this gay amusement by occasional glances at Lord Varley, who always caught and returned them—which, of course, was honest of him. He sat alone in his pew, Lady Varley being at home with the poor little baby, who was not so well to-day.

The curate read the prayers in his loud, slow voice. It was so slow, that the congregation, getting impatient, were rather in advance of him. He was English, which did not endear him to the farming classes, and his accent was quite beyond their comprehension. The sun's hot rays poured through the windows on the men's defenceless heads, and suggested slumber as a thing to be encouraged. They began to nod.

"The young lions do lark, and suffer hunger!"

This bit of the psalms struck them as being new and skittish, and with one consent they roused themselves and applied themselves vigorously to the discovery of it in their books. They did not find it. "Lack" was the nearest thing they could get to it. The curate's ultra-English accent had once again

misled them. They were annoyed, and fumed a good deal, so that sleep fled from their eyelids. A few of them who had not disbelieved, or sought knowledge from the Church Service, thought it was all right, and very proper that young lions, if dissipated, should afterwards pay the penalty of their crimes by going through a course of starvation.

The psalms came to an end, so did the lessons. Presently the wheezy organ set up its pipes, and the hymn was given out. It was, as usual, "Blow ye the trumpet, blow."

The old woman who called herself the organist struck a quavering chord or two; the old woman who had the presumption to lead the choir gave way to a gruesome sound that was meant for F sharp. It was, however, F natural, in spite of the music, and very bad at that. The organ continued its key, she continued hers, the two or three timid young girls who alone could be induced to join in the performance followed suit, and as they all sang exactly one note behind each other, the harmony was perfect.

Mrs. Dundas, who was not musical, laughed a little, Constantia frowned. The first note conquered, the line was given, "Blow ye the trumpet—blow, ho, ho—ho, ho!" the ancient leader and the timid girls lingered lovingly on the last "ho," and were just pausing to take breath for a fresh outburst when—

What was it? Every one jumped a foot or two off the ground, and turned in a body to stare at the huge crimson curtain that hung over the doorway, presumably to keep out a draught. There was, indeed, a general bounce all round.

Good heavens! what was it? A sound only; but an ear-piercing one; a stirring blast; a *shrill* blast that seemed to shake the very foundations of the edifice, and make the rafters ring, and cause the guilty ones to tremble in their shoes, as awful warnings about the last day awoke within their breasts. One or two decrepit old people, who were unable to stand during the vocal performances, fell off their seats and rolled under them. What *could* that sound be but the last trump? and how should one meet it,

save on one's face and hands? They were ultimately picked up by their grandchildren considerably the worse for wear.

It was certainly a trumpet, and blown by one with superhuman lungs! This all men knew. Mr. Roche, the rector, came out from behind the altar rails, and looked daggers at the unoffending curtain from whence the iniquitous sound had come. Even yet the echo of it resounded through the sacred place. The walls were providentially stronger than those of Jericho, because they stood the shock bravely, and remained firm.

There was a silence for a full minute, and then one of the school-children began to cry. He did it out loud and shamelessly; in fact, it was a perfect bellow. He was ignominiously put out by the ear by the indignant sexton, but his yells broke through the awkward and angry pause of the rector. The latter presently resumed the service, but there was no more music on that day. The organist and the leader had both been carried home by the timid girls, both in strong hysterics.

Barry, when he found what he had done, and when the first burst of wild laughter was at an end, was rather frightened. He was more than that; as he recalled to himself the rector's face as seen by him through a hole in the curtain, he was contrite. He lurked about the precincts of the churchyard until the sermon had come to an end, and then went straight to the rector's study and confessed his sins.

Mr. Roche, usually the mildest-natured man, and meek as Moses with the cross old paupers, who were as impertinent as they were ungrateful, was now outrageously angry with this well-to-do parishioner, and refused him absolution; in fact, he would hardly listen to excuses. He strode up and down the tiny study, and worked out his wrath with many words.

"It was rascally conduct, sir," he exclaimed, "unworthy of a Christian or a gentleman—to insult those two old ladies, and turn a sacred verse into ridicule! If such offences were to be lightly condoned there

would be no safety anywhere. One would imagine that just at this critical time, when our country is laid in the dust by the conduct of those miscreants who pretend to represent their native land in Parliament, gentlemen would have the good taste to refrain from even the appearance of evil; but you have put yourself in the mouths of all men to-day."

"Nobody knows of it but you," said Barry mildly. He was looking the picture of remorse, and as he spoke he sighed. He was in reality dying with laughter, but Mr. Roche only heard the sigh and saw the repentant face of the young man.

"Who gave you that bugle?" he demanded sternly; so sternly that Barry felt he was yielding.

"My great-grandfather," said he promptly; "at least it was his, and fell to my lot with the rest of the things. I wish now he'd disposed of it prior to his decease, for the very look of it will be poison to me for the rest of my days."

"Who put you up to that unwarrantable act of impiety?" asked the rector, regarding him fixedly.

"Not a soul," said Barry; but, as he said it, he thought of Constantia, and his promise to her to make an end of that hymn on the first opportunity. "I'm afraid, Mr. Roche," he said, with his eyes on the ground, "that I have a heart capable of much evil! But I think you might forgive me now it's all over."

"My forgiveness counts for nothing," said the rector, drumming his fingers on the table. "You are a sad trial to me, Barry, in many ways, and this abominable offence has worn away the last shred of my patience." He was very fond of Barry, and was, therefore, specially angry with him.

"If I could do anything," hinted the miscreant. "I can't bear being out of your good graces, Mr. Roche, and that's the fact. A cheque, now, for your old women——"

"Tut, tut," said the rector, throwing out his hands, as if to ward off temptation. "You can't *buy* your salvation, my good boy. You must go to Father Moroney" (the Roman Catholic clergyman) "for that sort of thing."

"But still the old women!" persisted Barry, who had seen the avaricious light in the rector's eye. Oh, kindly avarice, that longed, and desired, and sought, for the halt, the maimed, and the blind! "And you see, as you have called me 'your good boy,' I can't be altogether lost to grace; there must be a grain or two left in me."

The roguish smile crept over his face that the rector knew and loved.

"Now, Barry, go home; go home and repent," he said hurriedly, not suffering himself to dwell upon the bribe, lest he should be unable to resist it.

Yet when Barry sent him a very handsome cheque that evening, for his "old women," he accepted it, and spent an hour full of the wildest excitement deciding upon the most profitable way of laying it out, in blankets, coals, tea, etc.

Though the rack would not have induced the rector to betray Barry's confession, still a knowledge of the profane one's name became pretty generally known. And Barry, going up to The Cottage on the following Wednesday, met with an extremely cool reception from Constantia, who revered the rector beyond all living men, and was indignant that Barry should not have spared *him* at least, when one of his wild fits was on him.

She was in the kitchen making a jam-tart for dinner, when he arrived, and Barry, who knew the back entrance as well as the front one, having seen her through a window, nearly up to her neck in flour, boldly abstained from knocking, but made his way to the lower regions, *viâ* the kitchen-door, without delay. He made also the discovery that if Constantia in everyday attire was charming, Constantia in a big white bib, with her sleeves tucked up, and her lovely arms exposed to view, was adorable!

Her eyes, however, as they fell on him, were implacable, and her whole bearing full of a fine contempt.

CHAPTER XVI.

SHOWING HOW CONSTANTIA WAS EXCEEDING WROTH, AND
HOW BARRY PRAYED FOR PARDON.

THE kitchen was a remarkably lovely bit of colour. It was growing towards evening, and the dying rays of the sun could not shine into it. It was, however, brilliantly lit by a roaring fire, that sent up a red glow to the very roof, which was vaulted. The flames caught at the bright tins and brasses, and played fantastic tricks with the china bowls upon the dresser. The jack-towel shone white beneath its glance, though early in the morning it was a distinct brown.

From the vaulted roof hung strings of onions, round and golden, and here and there were hams, and gammons, and tidy little bags redolent of sage and thyme. The fire cast its hot glances upon all, and turned the warm tiles to a blood red.

It was a pretty, quaint picture, that might almost have been labelled as "a Dutch interior," with Constantia as a brilliant figure in the foreground.

She came a step or two forward as Barry came in, and, as has been said, her aspect was unpromising.

"So you've done it at last," she said.

"I have," returned Barry, throwing out his chest, and trying to look triumphant—a dismal failure. "I've boycotted that hymn for ever, I take it. And a good thing, too."

"Is that the way you intend to brazen it out?" demanded she. "Are you so lost to all sense of propriety that you don't know when you are in fault? Garrett Barry, I'm *ashamed of you!*"

Her eyes glowed; she stood erect. The dignity of her appearance suffered no diminution because of the dab of flour upon her Grecian nose.

"It's very good of you to take so much trouble," said Barry, who was now growing indignant in turn. "Faith, I didn't think you had so sincere a regard for me."

"It doesn't matter what *I* have. *You* are the one

in question. To think you should have so disgraced yourself!"

"What have I done, then?" demanded he.

"Done! Is it nothing, do you think, to blow a trumpet in a church—in the middle of the service, before——"

"Why shouldn't I blow my own trumpet?" interrupted he. He stopped short, and laughed angrily. "If I didn't blow it, I don't expect there is any one would blow it for me."

"I should hope not, indeed," said Constantia, who was too wrathful to notice his real meaning. "How could you conceive—how had you the hardihood to carry out such a plot? One would think you lived in a savage land, in some country where the laws of society do not obtain. One would think you were determined to make your friends blush for you. One would imagine that some innate sense of kindness would have held you back from insulting those two poor old women, who——"

"One, one, *one*!" cried he. "What one? You?"

Constantia fell back upon an eloquent silence, and, returning to the kitchen table, once more took up the thread of her tart, and worked away at the pastry with a will that had something of the force of venom in it. To him she vouchsafed no longer either glance or word.

He bore this ignominious treatment for some time without protest; but presently he spoke.

"So you won't speak to me, Constantia?" he said reproachfully.

"Certainly not. If you stood there for ever I should not address one word to you," declared she, with scorn concentrated upon her lovely lips. That she was speaking to him was a fact that had escaped her.

"I may as well go, at that rate," said he gloomily.

"Far better," returned she concisely.

Barry took one step towards the door, and then looked back. No relenting on the brow of his goddess! Two steps; and Constantia was bending over the neglected paste, beating it firmly into shape with the help of a truculent roller. Three steps.

Surely, thought the culprit, so sweet a body cannot harbour an adamant soul, and now she will relent. He looked at her with all his heart in his eyes, and as he did so she lifted her head.

"Mulcahy, where are you? Come here," she cried, in a perfectly even voice, looking through Barry, as though he were not, to where in the scullery beyond Mulcahy might be. It grew plain to him that she was determined to ignore his very existence. She had, in fact, ceased to see him.

This insult was more than he could endure, with any show of resignation. It enraged him, whilst reducing him to despair. He undid the three steps, and found himself once more beside her.

"Constantia," he breathed in a sepulchral whisper, "did you ever hear of the word suicide?"

"Frequently I have also heard of the word fool!" returned she, with cruel point-blankness.

"People before this have cut their own throats," went on Barry darkly.

"Quite so. Those were the people for whom the word 'fool' was coined." She was looking straight at him with remorseless eyes. Apparently she was not of the easily frightened sort, a discovery that delighted him.

"Are you determined, then, to drive me to it?" he said, in a tone specially tragic.

"Go home!" exclaimed Constantia, with all the air of one who has lost her last grain of patience. "Go home; and never presume to speak to me again on such abominable topics. Suicide, indeed!"

"Good-bye, then. I hope you will not live to regret this day."

"I hope from this day that you will learn to abstain from vice, and that you will put that bugle, or trumpet, or whatever it is, into the fire without delay."

"You're a bitter Christian," said Mr. Barry, with deep reproach. "Is it because I dote on you, and you know it, that you are so hard on me? D'ye call that generous? As angry as Mr. Roche was—and of course he had bigger cause than you—he forgave me! I feel sure," said Barry, playing his trump with a

regretful air, "that he would be *shocked* if he knew of your unforgiving spirit."

"I hope that's true," said Constantia, regarding him with some suspicion. If her pattern saint had been lenient to the sinner, why should she withhold her pardon? Perhaps, too, there was something in the reproachful eyes of the big Limerick man that appealed to her gentle heart; and that touch about the "unforgiving spirit" did a good deal for him.

"It's as true as that I'm standing here," said he. Was there a double meaning in that artful speech? Was a hint conveyed?

"You can sit down if you like," said Constantia coldly. But the permission was a concession, and Mr. Barry gladly availed himself of it by seating himself upon the edge of the kitchen table. In this happy position he was very near her, and could look into her eyes. He could also decorate his coat-tails with flour free of charge, and was doing it liberally, though perhaps of this he was not aware.

"There is one thing about you," said Constantia, still severely, though there was a visible melting of her hard mood about the corners of her lips. "You don't seem in the least sorry. No! I don't care about what you have said, you can generally say a great deal more than most people; it is your *expression* that I doubt."

"If that's all," said Barry, "it isn't of the least consequence. More than me are belied by their looks. There's you, now! Any one to see you would say, 'There goes the softest angel on earth,' and yet you are like a stone to me."

"Never mind me." She waived that interesting thought to one side with a floury hand. "What I wish to know is, are you really contrite?"

"Contrite, is it? And with you looking coldly on me? What d'ye take me for? Faith, I'd be more than mortal if I cared this moment whether I were dead or alive; though, perhaps, after all, I wrong myself, and there is a leaning towards the side of death."

"I don't see what I have got to do with it," said

Constantia gravely. The gravity for the most part was due to the fact that the tart was now finished, and that she was making little patterns on the edges of the paste with a fork and spoon. "What is really to be thought of is, that you vexed Mr. Roche——" She stopped abruptly and reddened, feeling that after all this was not the fault for which he should feel contrition. "That is, I mean," she went on rather lamely, "you should be sorry because—— because——"

Barry, being wise in his generation, took no notice of her slip.

"Of course I regret it all," he said. "One can see that." Then his sense of humour conquered all things, and his eyes brightened with a merry fire, and he leaned across the table towards her. "Constantia," said he confidentially, breaking into an irrepressible laugh, "you were there; you could see. How did the two old tabbies take it?"

Constantia struggled with herself. She fought a desperate battle with her dignity, but in the end dignity sank out of sight. She leaned her hands upon the table, lifted her pretty head, and unfortunately allowed herself one glance at Barry. That settled it. She broke into laughter, low, but irresistible as his.

Long and merrily they laughed, until at last Constantia dried her eyes in the becoming bib and spoke.

"As you had gone so far, it was a pity you couldn't have seen it out," she said, still laughing. "Poor old ladies, they thought it was the crack of doom. Never were two so terrified at the thought that their last hour had come. Yet why? one wonders, considering how soon it *must* come. They had to be taken home, and have been very hysterical ever since. Don't call upon them, Garrett, for the next twelve months, if you wish to keep clear of assault and battery."

"A word to the wise is sufficient, though I confess I should not have gone even had you not spoken."

"I was sorry, however, about dear Mr. Roche," said Constantia earnestly.

"That rather cut me up, too. But he was very good about it, and granted me absolution rather sooner than I deserved."

"I should have made you pay the piper, had I been he."

"As I told you before, he is a better Christian than you are. However, I did pay the piper in part—I sent him a few ha'pence for his beloved poor—and I think he was pleased."

"Pleased! You could have given him no keener pleasure. It was good of you," said she, looking at him now with very kindly eyes. It gave him courage. He edged closer to her.

"I'm glad you're pleased, at all events," said he. "Constantia!"

He tried to take her hand, but she put it deliberately behind her, and looked at him with a little saucy nod as much as to say, "Now, then!"

"Well, you're a little flint," said he. "And yet—Constantia, say you *like* me."

"Certainly I like you."

"That's all very well—but—who do you like better, now?"

"Why should I like any one better?" demanded she, being, it must be allowed, *tant soit peu coquette*.

"If you meant that in earnest, I'd be the happiest man above ground to-day," said Barry. "But—and it isn't that I'd distrust you at all, Constantia, only, 'I dote yet doubt, suspect yet strongly love.'"

It would be impossible to describe the tragic fervour with which these words were rolled out with a true Milesian richness that added considerably to the effect. It delighted Constantia. She burst into a ripple of uncontrollable mirth, and tucking her arm into his, led him through the kitchen-door and towards the orchard. The warm June sunshine smote on their faces.

"You shall have some strawberries," cried she gaily. "We have them of our own now, though few and far between, but you are worthy of them. You are the most amusing man I know, the joy of my life; what on earth should I do without you? All the others

are flat, stale, and unprofitable, when compared with you."

She was in excellent spirits. Featherston had sent her a charming bunch of Dijon roses in the morning, and a pretty little message. She treasured both: one in her own room, the other in her bosom. As for Barry, she did not believe sufficiently in the depth of his attachment to be any way depressed by it.

"If you do not mean a little of what you say, you are a wicked girl," said Barry, regarding her wistfully. He was very honestly in love with her, and thought morning, noon, and night of his chances for and against her acceptance of him. "At all events, there is no doubt at all about your being the joy of *my* life. And if it is true that you can't do without me, why——"

"There's Mr. Stronge!" interrupted Constantia, with an exclamation of eager relief. "Here ~~he~~ is, coming up the walk. How d'ye do, Mr. Stronge?" She held out her hand to Stronge, with such a beaming smile, and such an unreserved warmth of welcome, that she woke within his breast a joy better left unknown. "What has brought you to-day? How did you know I was here? Mr. Barry and I have just come into the garden in a mad quest for strawberries. Will you join us?"

He joined them.

CHAPTER XVII.

SHOWING HOW A SNAKE THRUST ITS HEAD INTO THE
DOVE'S NEST.

THE little child was slowly but surely fading from out her arms. It might linger for a day or two, a week, perhaps, but hope there was none. So frail now was its hold on earth, that already—most blessed child—heaven was within its grasp! It was dying gently,

calmly, painlessly, a veritable falling of the bud, and the only one who could not see it, was the mother.

She was walking up and down her private drawing-room with it now, clasping it closely to her breast—not hushing it to slumber or soothing fractious cries (alas, how gladly would she have hailed them!), because the little thing was marvellously still and quiescent, and lay prone within the clinging arms without a moan, without a movement. She had sent the nurse away that she might have it all to herself. A hungry desire to share it with no one was full on her. She started perceptibly, therefore, when the door was thrown open and a servant announced Mrs. Dundas.

Lady Varley lifted her head with a sudden flash of amazed displeasure that was, however, no sooner born than crushed. But Donna saw it. Here! To have a—a stranger shown into her favourite apartment was an act that plainly angered her. She conquered herself at once, and moving forward, received Mrs. Dundas with her customary gentleness.

“They told me you were in here, with—baby,” said Donna, with a charming smile and the prettiest touch of hesitating tenderness before the word “baby.” “They would have taken me to the drawing-room below, but I wanted so to see her. *May I?*”

She advanced towards the child, and looked quite entreatingly at Lady Varley. One might readily imagine her whole heart to be in her request.

Lady Varley hesitated involuntarily but momentarily, then sighed, then smiled, and so the battle was won. The mother could not resist the woman who showed an interest in her child. She drew back the coverings, and let Donna look at the baby’s small, pinched face.

Mrs. Dundas bent over it with quite an air of hushed rapture. She did not admire it at all. It was like a little rabbit when skinned, she told herself, and she blessed her stars that she was not the mother of such an one; but she prodded its thin little cheek with her finger, and caressed the tiny hand, and did, indeed, all that could be required of her. She was studiously orthodox; she omitted no conventional

word of praise; *only* she did not kiss it. That, she said afterwards, was more than any one could expect. One should never kiss a baby unless one had a bath ready in the next room, into which to plunge oneself after the ordeal. And then, *such* a baby!

Of course, she saw it was not doomed to live. She saw, too, that Lady Varley did not believe this. She had certain elements of good nature in her, or she would have laughed at this. She still bent over the baby, and made pretty remarks about it in a low, *trainante* voice that fascinated most people.

"How quiet!" she said. "How good!"

"Yes, very quiet; such a good little angel!" said Lady Varley, with feverish eagerness. Then, as if struck by some sudden horror, she stopped short, and Mrs. Dundas could see that her colour flew and left her livid. Love grows superstition, and now that word "angel" had driven a nail into her heart. By her own mouth had she condemned her little one, and driven it forth from the fond shelter of the mother's arms to the unknown—the awful! In her anguish, the sweetness and rest of heaven was forgotten. "Oh, not altogether an angel, I assure you," she cried, in a strained tone. "Sometimes we cannot manage her—nurse and I; but just now, and usually, she is calmness itself. A sign of health, I take it. At least that is what Dargan, her nurse, says—a very experienced woman. And to be always quiet, surely betrays a singular freedom from pain or ache. You think so?"

"It is beyond question," said Donna.

"She is calmness itself; she never cries or complains. They tell me she is delicate," said Lady Varley, with an attempt at a scornful smile; "but I prefer to judge for myself. You can see how good-tempered she is; how unlike other children——"

She paused again. Was every idle word that fell from her to carry to her breast a bitter pang? "Unlike other children!" Oh, no! Kind heaven, *no*! A strange look grew upon her face, and she clasped the fragile little form to her bosom with a wild, hungry gesture. It was her all!

"She is strong—quite strong!" she said vehemently, as though Mrs. Dundas had been denying it. Then her voice sank, and she looked down at the little waxen face below her. "My child! My life!" she whispered, and then broke off suddenly, as if choking. She stood panting before Donna (almost forgetful of her, in the awful fear that had assailed her), with the child crushed against her breast. Some cruel doubt was tearing at her heart-strings.

"Your nurse is, as you say, experienced; she should know," said Donna cheerily, unkind kindness prompting the hopeful words. She was indeed touched by this fierce grief, if altogether surprised by it. To care so much for any living thing! It was absurd, but piteous beyond doubt. To her, the child seemed dying, and she thought it repulsive, having nothing of the maternal about her; but she felt herself bound to say something that should create comfort in the other's mind, if only to avoid a scene. A scene was detestable, always, unless a disappointed lover was the hero of it; and so she ignored Lady Varley's agitation with great tact, and finally, by her own assumption of belief in the child's good health, subdued it.

As she was leaving Araglin, she met Constantia coming up the stone steps. She put out her delicately gloved hand to her with her usual radiant smile. Constantia accepted both very coldly.

"Truant!" said Mrs. Dundas. "How many years is it since you have been to see me?" She did not really care whether Constantia ever came to see her, whether she lived or died, but to be charming to all people was a creed with her. There was no one born who could say that Mrs. Dundas was ever wilfully rude to them. She put them to one side when they obstructed the path in which she would go, but otherwise, they were welcome to breathe the air that she did.

Constantia took no notice of the implied reproach. She appraised it at its exact value, and let it drop to her feet.

"Have you been in there?" she asked. Youth is

always a little tragic when its sense of honesty and decency is hurt. "Have you seen her?"

"Why, yes," said Mrs. Dundas, with an amused air. "I have been there, and I have seen her! What prodigality of emphasis, and what a Bernhardt pose! Any reason why I shouldn't?"

"No greater reason than you already know," said Constantia coldly, who was strong enough, when occasion demanded it (as she now believed it did), to be proof against her cousin's mockery.

"You are enigmatical, my pretty sphinx," said Donna, with a slight laugh. "You are evidently full of purpose, and therefore, no doubt, amusing. Come, you shall disclose yourself to me. The baby is as well as—the baby is ever likely to be. Better, therefore, take advantage of my ponies and return with me, and give me—besides the inestimable pleasure of your society—your secret. You are big with it; one can see that! Come, now, surrender yourself to me."

"I will go back with you if you will. It is as good an opportunity as another," said Constantia, still coldly. She turned and walked down the steps after her cousin, who swept on before with a little laugh.

"You would make your fortune on the stage," she was saying. "It is a sin to waste such force upon the birds, the trees, the cabbages. If I had you in town for a season, why, you would make a *furor*, and have all the gilded youth of the empire at your feet. If you encouraged yourself a little, that is, if you were a degree more—more—— It is difficult to name it. Well, step in." She turned to the groom at the ponies' heads. "Walk home, Smithson," she said, and touched up the ponies, and was well up the sweet-smelling lime-avenue before Constantia quite knew in what words she was going to clothe the speech she was bent on making. She had argued out the matter with herself, early and late, for all the days succeeding that scene in the garden between her cousin and Lord Varley that she had witnessed, during which time she had absented herself from Donna's presence; and had at last decided that she would tell her what she had

seen, and compel her to desist from further interference with the happiness of Lady Varley.

"Well," said Mrs. Dundas, glancing at her with a rather amused regard from under her long lashes, whilst the ponies flew swiftly through the scented air, "why don't you speak? Come, out with it. It is evidently something too great for that youthful frame of yours to hold."

"Listen, then!" said Constantia, angered by her air of suppressed amusement. She grew very pale, and then, all at once, she took her courage in her hands and spoke out. When she drew near to the end of her story her pallor left her, and when she told, with strong girlish hesitation, of that last act in her drama — that disgraceful caress—her breath came quickly, and a hot blush of shame mantled on her cheeks. But she bore it all in her loyalty to her friend, and in her desire to shield her from growing trouble.

"Yes?" said Donna interrogatively when she had finished. If she had been at all taken aback by Constantia's disclosure, she did not show it. She smiled now serenely, gazing at the girl as if in expectation of something further. "Go on," she said encouragingly, "give me the rest of it."

"The rest! What more would you have? Good heavens, Donna, are you lost to all sense of—of——"

"Virtue? Don't hesitate about saying it," said Mrs. Dundas, with a friendly little nod. "But you misjudge me, really. I quite thought, because of your tragic expression, that there must be something more."

"What more could there be?"

Mrs. Dundas laughed.

"And so all those exquisite blushes," she said, looking at her young cousin with much mockery in her lovely eyes, "were wasted on such a mere bagatelle? Bah! What a cruel squandering of rich and rare goods!"

"I think it was sufficient to make any one blush; you, first of all," said Constantia coldly.

"So? I am sorry I must disappoint your ex-

pectations, then. I confess a blush isn't in me. The blush proper, at all times, I found to be a troublesome companion, so I flung it off just as soon as ever I could. Now, occasionally, I regret that act of mine. If troublesome, the blush is also effective. There is a touch of the *ingénue* about it that is invaluable. Keep it, my dear, as long as you can."

"I have not come here to discuss the merits or demerits of a rush of blood to the head," said Constantia, with angry impatience; "rather, a very abominable act of yours."

There was fire in her eyes, if an unmistakable tremor in her tone. Yet her courage upheld her.

"My! what righteous indignation!" said Mrs. Dundas, turning her head so as to regard her fully. She was evidently unimpressed, and by no means offended by the other's out-speaking. "And all about a little kiss. One more or less in the year's account—what does it matter? If Lord Varley was rude enough to kiss me—mind you," laughing, "I don't admit the soft impeachment—it is part of my principles never to admit anything—but *if* he kissed me, why, that won't bring the world to a close, eh?"

"If you kissed him, you mean."

"Even *that* won't bring the upheaval of the universe; and, of course, I deny it. Any nice-minded woman would."

She laughed gaily here, and flicked up her ponies with a sense of thorough enjoyment in the turn the conversation had taken.

"Well, I warn you of one thing," said Constantia. "I shall certainly tell her."

"Tell her what, my good girl? That Varley, her husband, was an old lover of mine, and for a moment forgot himself?"

"There was no forgetfulness, save of personal dignity. There was only remembrance," said the girl bravely, but with a pale face. "And, as I have said, I shall certainly put her on her guard."

"You mean you will adopt the rôle of mischief-maker."

"I mean that I shall tell her what I saw."

Mrs. Dundas turned, and looked at her with calm questioning in her eyes.

"But do you really think you saw it?" she asked pleasantly. "Don't you rather think that those tricky moonbeams cheated you? If I were you I should be inclined to that belief; and yet, with that doubt on your mind——"

"Doubt!" interrupted Constantia, with wrathful protest. Could daring farther go?

"Strong doubt. You will, then, take this *canard* to Lady Varley, and embitter her life with a tale in which you yourself have not much faith. And even looking at it at its worst, what was it save a vague indiscretion?"

"You treat the matter very lightly, but I do not. She is unhappy enough as it is, and I will not sit quietly by and see her made more so."

"You say that? And yet it is *now* you would choose, to waken suspicion in her breast. You would create an *affaire* between me and Varley just when her child lies dying—when her heart is smitten. I saw her, she is torn with suppressed fear and emotion. You are a true woman, my pretty Constantia. You love an *imbroglio*."

"You wrong me when you say that. Do you think it doesn't hurt me to—to accuse you, my cousin, of so horrible a thing, and yet how can I be silent when such things are?"

"I, then, am to be the victim. You sacrifice me," said Mrs. Dundas gaily. "So be it. I shall deck myself for the altar. It is something to my lacerated feelings to know that you feel regret as you bind the cords. You are stern Justice itself, a veritable Brutus in petticoats. All for virtue, and the world well lost, is your motto; a cold one and insufficient, as you will learn in time. Well, go to your Saint Yolande, and tell her of Varley's treachery, as I feel sure you call it in your high-flown tragical style, and—take the consequences."

"Have you no conscience?" said Constantia, very pale. "Will you not promise me to abstain for the future from—from——" She hesitated, and blushed

warmly all through her clear skin, not knowing how to proceed.

"Well, go on; from—from——?" There was malicious mirth in Mrs. Dundas's eyes as she marked the other's discomfiture. "What! can't you finish the enigmatical sentence? You are too pretty to be a *diplomate*. Give it up, I advise you, and think only of how best to arrange for yourself, and so get the salt of life."

"Answer me," said Constantia.

"But how, then? Was there a question? I am not a thought-reader, my dearest Con. You say, 'Promise me for the future to abstain from——,' and there you stop. From what, then? Baccarat, loo, champagne, cigarettes?"

"From Lord Varley," said Constantia, in a low tone. She felt terrible shame as she said it, and her brow flushed crimson, her eyes filled with tears; she kept them fixed steadily on the white wolf's skin that covered her knees. "You are married, *he* is married, so is she—and then there is Mr. Dundas. It seems to me so dreadful a thing—and she, trusting, believing——"

She paused, hoping for some sympathetic answer, but the moments went past and Donna said nothing; she kept, indeed, singularly silent. Constantia, raising her eyes anxiously at last to see if this silence meant contrition, found Mrs. Dundas lost in one of her odd agonies of dumb laughter. She pulled herself together after a bit, and pressed her face handkerchief to her eyes, and then glanced at Constantia.

"Some day you will be the death of me," she said, her tone still trembling with her late merriment. "How you take things! Were life as serious a matter with me as it is with you, I should commit suicide. 'Life is a jest, and all things show it.' Why not look at it through my spectacles? Why not amuse yourself as I do, *moi qui vous parle?*" She laid her hand, with a little saucy pat, upon her bosom.

"No," said Constantia coldly, and with ill-suppressed disgust; "I would not be like you for all the amusement the world could give me."

"You are a very dear little girl," replied her cousin, suavely and promptly, and with an amused smile; "but, as I once hinted to you——" She paused, to quite gather the girl's entire attention. It was time, she thought, to administer to her a little smiling rebuke—to make her feel the knife in turn. "As I once hinted—too mildly, perhaps, for your good—you are a trifle crude—in a degree, perhaps—*shall* we say *farouche*? You have not trained fine; you project your opinions upon one bald and bare. When smothered in rose-leaves they fall easier; they do not hurt so much. A lesson, Con, free of charge. Take it to heart; it will be of use to you even in this odd little corner of the earth. Men like Barry, who are 'rough and tough,' and men like your blanket lover might, perchance, call your crudity honesty; but men like Featherston would shrink from it and from you." She had her eyes fixed on the girl's face, and noted with satisfaction the sudden paling, the quick indrawing of the breath, as Featherston's name was mentioned. In truth, Constantia felt that last remark keenly. Was she, then, unlovely in his eyes?

"You disdain to hide your sentiments," went on her tormentor sweetly. "That may be very upright, very honourable, but it is also very—ill-bred."

"Enough," said Constantia, quickly but coldly; "I admit all that you say. I see, too, that I have failed to impress you. I meant only to help my friend, and to show you your duty."

"Don't trouble yourself about that last ingredient in your dose; it sits lightly on my shoulders. I don't mind shirking it in the least, though I know there are people who set great store by it. They are welcome to mine as well as their own. I say, Con, a cloudy brow is not becoming to you; and, after all, why should you take to heart my delinquencies? Do you imagine you will get through life without having some of your own to dwell upon? When you have, my quaint pre-Adamite, I expect you will do it in sack-cloth and ashes. It will be a prolonged Lent with you, severe enough to eclipse the joys of your carnival.

Though you are specially uncivil to me, I confess I feel something bordering upon sorrow for you."

"Why cannot you be content with your lovely home—with your husband?" said Constantia sorrowfully.

Mrs. Dundas regarded her with a large amazement.

"It is true," she said at last. "You are the oldest fashioned person I ever met! To be content with Mr. Dundas would take a larger or a smaller mind than mine. He is, I admit, admirable. It would be impossible to put a finger on a speck anywhere, except, perhaps, the extraordinary size of his ears and his feet, and his regard for his coffers; but, *au fond*, he is very well—very well indeed. And yet—there has been such a thing as a glance behind one, even when one has been married to the best man in the world."

"Was your glance for Varley?"

"Would you be better pleased if I said it was for Featherston?"

"It scarcely matters," said Constantia, in a low, vehement tone, touched with passion; "the one great consideration is, that it be a *glance*, not glances. Give up this unworthy part, Donna, I entreat you, for the sake, not of Lady Varley, but of yourself. You are our cousin. Your dishonour must touch us. It is horrible to me."

"Your nobles have come to ninepences," said Mrs. Dundas, with a gay laugh. "Your concern, after all, on your own showing, is only selfishness. You dread an *esclandre* because it will drag you into its whirlpool. Well, be happy; there shall be no *esclandre* where I am concerned. And as for your Saint Yolande—pouf! It is not I who shall make her unhappy."

"You promise that?" asked Constantia eagerly, leaning forward so as to see her face.

"No, I shall not be the one," said Mrs. Dundas, smiling blandly into the girl's earnest eyes.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SHOWING HOW CIRCE WROUGHT HER ENCHANTMENTS, AND
TIGHTENED HER CAPTIVE'S CHAINS.

SHE left Constantia at the gate of The Cottage, and drove on. She was feeling a little amused, a little annoyed. No, *she* certainly would not be the one to make Lady Varley unhappy. It would, of course, be Varley. If Varley had been somebody else's husband, her flirtation with him would not have caused Constantia's saint a pang; therefore, of course, the fault would lie with Varley. Why was he her husband? Why had he been so very impossible that time in Italy? He had left her in an absurd anger because she chose to accept a pearl or two from a little grimacing prince, who was ugly as a monkey, and with all the airs of a dancing-master. Pshaw! If one had a spark of justice in one, it might be seen that he was the one in fault.

At her own gates she met him. He was just coming out, and, in fact, threw them open for her with an eager glance and a sudden smile, as if doing some service for his sovereign.

"What, you here!" cried she gaily. "And I have just come from Araglin; cross purposes, my lord." She used to call him thus sometimes, in an adorably jesting little tone, that delighted him and made his pulses throb. Was he indeed her lord? "Cross purposes all through," she went on, thinking of Constantia's diatribes against her behaviour. She lifted her shoulders at the remembrance, and laughed a little at the pretty fool's belief in her future honesty of purpose. "I met Constantia," she said; "she was brusque, terrible, abominable to me." She laughed lightly, and pulled her lace skirts aside. "Jump in," she said, still laughing, "and let me give you your tea. I will tell you all about it when we are between four walls."

Tea was served in her boudoir, a delicate little apartment, all of bronze and silver colouring, and sweet with the dying breaths of frail white pinks and

lily of the valley. She flung from her wraps and wide feathered hat, and Varley, who was seated on a low chair near her, drew off with lingering care her long tan-coloured gloves.

"Well," said she, "Constantia scolded me. A proper scolding, I can tell you."

"About what?"

"*Tiens*, Frederic! you grow dull. About you, if it must be put in plain words. I am never to look at you, I am never to think of you again. You are to be a thing of the past. I am to pass you by on the other side whensoever we may chance to meet, and I am to see that those meetings are infrequent."

"But how?" said Varley, not understanding, as was only natural. He was not much concerned by her words, because her manner was light with laughter. "What does it all mean?"

"That she was in the gardens that night of Mr. Stronge's dance."

Varley reddened.

"The deuce!" he said, briefly but eloquently.

"Quite so. I entirely agree with you. She is a troublesome little fool, you know, somewhat wild in manner and beyond purchase, but I squared her for all that. A judicious word or two about Featherston, whom she affects—a hint as to the cruelty of disturbing Lady Varley's peace of mind just now, when——"

"What! she would speak to Yolande?" cried Varley, rising to his feet, and regarding her with a strange expression. He looked horrified, unstrung.

"Even so. That alarms you? Yet every instant it is possible." She spoke easily, but a certain chill had fallen upon her tone. Her eyes had gained a mocking light. "It is not too late," she said. "Draw back while you can. As yet she knows nothing. Go; swear to her your heart is hers alone. Be wise whilst yet you may."

She, too, had risen. She leant against the silken hangings of the mantel-piece, her tall, *svelte* figure thrown slightly backwards, her eyes, with the lids half-closed upon their wondrous beauty, fixed on his. She looked superb as she thus challenged him, laughing

in her heart the while as she measured his power as compared with hers.

"You can leave me," she said, "now, for ever! Believe me, it is the best plan—for you."

"Leave you!" he said. There was passion as well as despair in his tone. No, he could not leave her! Her presence was his life. It intoxicated him. She ruled his destiny to-day as she had ruled it in those past days, when he sighed at her feet, an accepted lover.

"That rests, then," said Donna calmly. Then suddenly, and in a lower tone: "The child is dying."

Varley nodded. If he was sorry for the untimely withering of the fruit of his loveless marriage, it was a sorrow of the very vaguest.

"I saw it to-day," went on Donna, still in a lower key. "It was in her arms—she seemed to cling to it. Her eyes were large as those of one who seldom sleeps. She was so fierce in her disbelief of the child's coming death that one knew how entirely she believed. She impressed me, somehow."

"Why will you talk of her?" cried Varley, with sudden, vehement impatience. He paced angrily up and down the exquisite room for a minute or two, trying to restrain his bitter remorse, and then flung himself sullenly into a chair.

"It is true what Constantia says," said Donna dreamily; "she is a saint. Perhaps—to be a mother would make one feel like that! She received me very perfectly. I—were I in her place, and had she come to see me—I should have slapped her on her cheek. But she received me with a perfect grace. It was wonderful. I wish"—she paused, looking slowly at Varley, and then letting her eyes drop to the little white, idle hands toying with her fan—"I wish, as it *was* to be, that she—had been—some other woman."

She paused. Silence followed on her words. Her breath, that had been hurrying from between her lips with undue haste before, now grew painfully rapid as she marked the hesitation that kept him from replying. Was he wavering? She lifted her heavy, white lids and turned her large, slumbrous eyes on his with a

glance of keenest scrutiny. He felt it, and stirred beneath it uneasily.

"So do I," he said at last very quietly. His gaze was bent upon the ground. He could not see the swift transition of colour that swept across her face, nor the light that lit her eyes.

"Ah! you have fear—regret?" she cried. The words seemed to burst from her in a little passion of contempt and anger.

"That is a silly speech. I have no fear, and certainly no regret strong enough to work a reformation. But I would gladly have had it all otherwise." He spoke moodily.

"Have it so, then," returned she impetuously. She made a scornful gesture with her hand, and threw back from her white brow the fine red hair that hung round it like a halo. "It is a simple thing to undo—this friendship of ours. To see me now and again, to speak to me—there is not much in it to be renounced."

"Is that how you look at it?" said he. There was reproach in his regard.

"It is how you will learn to look at it—when you have forgotten." A faint quiver shook her voice; something came into her eyes that made them softer, deeper, lovelier. Varley made a movement towards her, but she waved him back. "No, no," she said. "You must begin from this moment if it is to be so."

"There were years," said he, "and yet—did I forget?"

"How can I tell? Lady Varley is undeniably handsome. She is a stone, a bit of ice. You may have found her disappointing, afterwards. But certainly she is handsome."

"She may be. It is possible. I don't know," said he wearily. "There is only one thing sure—that always your face was before me, your voice in my ears, your touch upon my hand, my hair, your image in my heart."

"You will have to blot that out, my friend, if——" She paused. She drew nearer to him with the soft, languorous movement that was part of her, and was always so sweet to him, and laid her small,

fine, strong little hand upon his breast. "It is not too late yet. Go—go back to her—to the woman you have married; leave the woman you——" She looked at him.

"Love," he said, finishing her sentence for her. He lifted her hand from his breast, and laid it on his brow and then upon his lips. He kissed it passionately. "Love," he said again, but this time he called her by it, as though it were her name. "My one love, my sweet."

She laughed. All the coldness, the cruelty went out of her eyes, and a subtle mockery, tinged with subtler tenderness, took its place.

"That is not the way to begin," she whispered, her beautiful red lips parted by a smile. "Take courage in both hands, and put me from you." The pretty palm, that still lay upon his mouth, pressed it ever so delicately as she thus advised him to relinquish her.

"Too late."

"Nay; that is mere cowardice. What am I more than another that you cannot let me go? Catch up your honour, I implore you, ere it sink into the mire!" She spoke mockingly, with an insolent daring, for as yet the man had not so far fallen that his honour was no longer dear in his sight. She laughed aloud in the certainty of her power. Her glance, burning into his, was a wild mingling of love and triumph. "Honour, Frederic!" she repeated recklessly. "Think of it! It is a magic word that should sway you. To love *her* means honour; to love *me*"—she crept closer to him, and raising one arm, passed it slowly, seductively around his neck—"dishonour!"

"So be it," said Varley unsteadily. He drew her to him and pressed his lips to the exquisite blue-veined throat, from which the laces fell away as though deeming it shame to hide it.

She sank into a low chair, and poured out tea into the pretty eggshell china cups before her. There was a delicate flush upon her cheeks; her eyes were gleaming; she looked adorable.

"After all," she said, "we have had our little tussle

for nothing. Why should you not be my friend? Why not call here as you will, in spite of all the prudes in the world? There is nothing dishonourable in the mere fact of your finding me more attractive than your wife. If I had forbidden you my presence because Constantia said a few ugly things, I should have been as stupid as she. But if I *had* done so, I do not see how you would have been greatly the loser."

"I do," said Varley. "Not to see you, never to hear your voice, would have made life insupportable."

"You managed to exist for a considerable time, however, without those joys. If I had never returned, I dare say you would have got on very well without them until old age seized you."

"But you did return. We met. If I ever madly dreamed I had erased your memory from my heart, our first meeting dispelled the illusion."

"If only you had not married," said she, very low. And then, with a sudden and entire change of manner, and a wrenching of herself away, as it were, from all such folly as even a vague remorse: "Well," she cried gaily, "some one should go to the wall; and she—doesn't love you. She!" with a contemptuous intonation. "One can see it in her eyes, her mouth—she doesn't know how to love. Sugar?" She paused and smiled, as at some happy recollection, and leant towards him. "Do you remember," she said, "what a baby you were about sugar long ago? One, two, three lumps I used to drop into your cup, and you would not have them unless I put them in with my fingers. Once, when I refused (what a naughty boy you were then!), you threw my dear little *repousée* sugar-tongs into the fire. You took your punishment very well, however."

Varley laughed.

"Put them in with your fingers now," he said. "You owe me something. All my life, I think, since first I met you, has been one long punishment."

"Until now," she put in softly. "Well, how many? The old number—one, two, three? Greedy, as of yore? One would imagine sweets might have palled upon you by this."

“Not such sweets as you can offer.”

He was quite himself again. Any shadow of remorse that had fallen upon him had been conquered, cast out by the brightness of her presence. He had pushed a low chair close to hers, and the perfume of the violets that nestled in her breast came to him with every breath she drew.

“Ah!” said she; “but if we are to be friends, you must be good, remember. Such pretty speeches are to be tabooed. There are Constantias in the world, and—others. I would have you beware.”

“There are also such hours as this,” said he.

Even as he spoke, there came the sound of a heavy tread, of approaching footsteps upon the corridor outside.

“Say moments, rather,” whispered Mrs. Dundas hurriedly, making a quaint little *moue*. “Here comes Cerberus. Push your chair back a bit, and take that look out of your eyes. Settle yourself in a bored position, and brighten up when he enters. Look specially glad to see him. . . . Ah, Jo! what luck to get you at this time of day! Generally your horrid turnips hold you fast, or your shorthorns, or your bullocks, or some other worthless thing. Everything is of more consequence than your poor wife. Come here, and sit beside the injured woman, sir, and give her an account of your doings. It was just as well you came when you did, I can tell you, as Lord Varley was on the point of yawning himself to death. No, not a word, Lord Varley; not an excuse. I forgive you.”

CHAPTER XIX.

SHOWING HOW NORAH SUFFERED PERSECUTION ; AND HOW
HER IMPRISONMENT WAS MADE ENDURABLE BY THE
AID OF JAM-TARTS, AND THE BLANDISHMENTS OF A
KIND YOUNG MAN.

THOUGH Barry had suffered defeat on that last day when he strove to press his suit with Constantia, still he was in no wise daunted, and only waited for a romantic opportunity to press it again. The romantic moment, however, not presenting itself as quickly as the soul of a lover desired, he one day made up his mind to defy the power of effect, and marched up to The Cottage in a new suit of gray clothes that he flattered himself were eminently becoming, to seek an interview with Constantia.

He knew the room that oftenest held her ; and going round through the tiny garden, gently approached the window, which was open, and looked in. Somebody was there certainly, a voice fell upon his ears. But surely those were not the dulcet tones of his beloved !

If his beloved was a most alarming old woman with a cap and a false front, and a violent temper, certainly she it was. Miss MacGillicuddy in a fine frenzy was pouring forth the vials of her wrath on the wretched Norah, who stood a trembling, miserable culprit before her. Barry stared, aghast, unable to move, so great was his astonishment and disappointment at not seeing Constantia. He was, too, a remarkably good-natured young man, and to see Norah in woe went to his heart. He was fond of Norah, not only because she was near to his rose, but for her own sake ; and the child was fond of him, though perhaps she had a preference for Stronge. So great now was Barry's concern for the frail little creature under sentence, that he leant his elbows on the window-sill, and listened with all his might to the altercation within, if that could be called an altercation when only one spoke. The child seemed stricken into a dumb terror.

He had not heard the beginning of the "row," as he called it, but he gathered sufficient from what was being then said to comprehend the first act. Norah had evidently not been proof against the temptations of a little fruit tart, two inches by two and a half inches, one of half-a-dozen prepared for the day's dinner, and had taken it from the pantry, and had eaten part of it when Miss MacGillicuddy had pounced upon her, and dragged her into this small parlour to receive punishment. Later on, it transpired that Mulcahy had given the little tart, with a kiss, and her blessing in honest Irish, but the child had been too frightened to explain. The unhappy tart now lay upon the table, half-demolished, and the more tempting in that fruit could be seen.

"To steal," Miss MacGillicuddy was saying in an awful voice, standing erect, her gaunt figure drawn up to its fullest height, whilst she shook a long forefinger at the trembling Norah, "means to be a thief! *You are a thief!*"

The child writhed in an agony of protest, but her frightened little tongue clove to the roof of her mouth, and no sound came. Barry's heart bled for her.

"You are not only a base thief but a glutton," went on Miss MacGillicuddy triumphantly, who was plainly enjoying herself—as many of the pious ones of the earth do, over the despair of the sinners. "But your sin has found you out. And mine is the privilege to be the one to bring you to a sense of it, to show you the horrors of theft, to teach you the abomination of greediness, to instil into your mind the necessity for curbing the appetite, and subjecting all earthly passions to the more spiritual influences. Mind must govern body, not body mind!" She quite glowed with the fervour of her words, this old woman eloquent, as she thus addressed the shaking child of eleven. "I consider it to be my duty to correct you, so I ordain that you sit here on this high chair (I think it is a hard one) and keep that tart there before you on the table, within reach of your hand, for one hour by yonder clock. You are to keep your eyes

fixed upon it ; but let me find that during my absence your teeth make no acquaintance with it."

Barry could bear no more. He sprang through the window and into the room. Miss MacGillicuddy glared at him. Norah burst into low sobs. Barry, for her own sake, took no notice of them.

"I heard you as I came up, Miss MacGillicuddy," he began, shaking the hand of the unwilling spinster with immense *empressement*. "You are always so terse, so true, so eloquent, so—er—to the point, don't ye know."

Nobody could have known ; but his manner was rich in flattery, and Miss MacGillicuddy caught at the word eloquent. She believed herself secretly to be a born orator, and often sighed for an opportunity to ascend a public platform and harangue an intelligent mob.

"If you have heard," she said, "you understand the sad necessity that has been forced upon me by this erring girl to punish a heinous misdemeanour. My words, it appears, reached your ears. Such, Mr. Barry, are the salutary lessons I teach my young charges, with a view to making their vices subservient to them, not they to their vices, as is too often the case in this present demoralised generation !" She made a full stop. She seemed struck with admiration at her own fluency of speech. Surely that was a sentence full of force and elegance.

"Excellent ! Excellent !" applauded Barry. "Oh, if I had only had an aunt like you in my young days, what a different man I might be to-day !" He spoke with such extreme fervency, that Norah, who was still crying silently with lowered and abashed eyes, lifted her head suddenly to bestow upon him a glance of withering scorn. She had believed in Barry, and now ! She puckered up her small features into a disgusted expression, and her big eyes, that always seemed so many degrees too large for her thin little face, flashed fire. She had lost the elaborate wink that Barry had bestowed upon her, and fully regarded him as faithless. She would have her revenge, however, she mused—she would tell Constantia. And

never, never would Constantia be civil to the traitor again.

"You should repent," said Miss MacGillicuddy in a sepulchral tone, looking at Barry. The look, however, was as mild as she could make it. She was touched by his regret that she had not had the guardianship of his youth. "You should join us." She pointed to the dingy bit of blue ribbon that adorned her dingier gown. Then, once more she addressed the miserable Norah, who had clambered into the obnoxious high chair placed near the table, on which was placed, in an offensive prominence, the unlucky tart.

"You have my orders," she said. "Do not dare to disobey them, lest worse befall you. I am now going to the town, to take the chair at the women's Blue Ribbon meeting that takes place this afternoon. I shall probably be away about two hours; but as your punishment is to last but an hour——" She hesitated. "I have been mild, culpably mild, I think." She hesitated again, and Norah grew cold with fright lest the second hour was about to be tacked on to her first term of imprisonment. "However, my word has gone forth," she went on at last, "and so it shall rest. Watch that clock, you unhappy girl!" pointing to the undainty timepiece that desecrated the mantel-shelf; "and when the hour has gone by, you may get off that chair. To study the time is the one recreation I will allow you—the only opportunity I will permit you to remove your gaze from that evidence of your gluttony. I regret I cannot stay to entertain you, Mr. Barry," with gruesome graciousness; "but——"

"Oh, thank you. I beg you will not abstain from your good work for my sake," entreated Barry eagerly. "I merely came to ask George a question."

"Quite so. You will remain here, then, probably for some time. Let me beg of you to see that that unhappy glutton yonder obeys my behest."

"Rely upon me. It will give me a sorrowful pleasure to see you are obeyed to the very letter," said Barry solemnly.

She bade him adieu and left the room. When

she had disappeared safely up the gravelled walk, and the gate had clicked behind her, a fact ascertained by Mr. Barry by a judicious peeping from behind the dingy curtains, he turned to Norah.

"She's gone," he said; "bad luck go with her. There's the click of the gate." He stood on tiptoe once more and craned his neck cautiously, and had the gratification of seeing her stalking down the road up to her ankles in dust. "Well, of all the old devils!" said he. He gave up his private reflections there, and went up to the sad little sinner perched on her stool of repentance.

"Poor little beggar!" said he, as tenderly as though he had called her by a more endearing appellation; "and was all that fuss about one cake?"

"Don't dare speak to me," returned Norah, with a wrathful shriek.

Mr. Barry gave way beneath it. He opened his eyes and gazed at her in ever-increasing wonder.

"Stuff and nonsense!" he cried at last; "d'ye mean to tell me you didn't understand me? That you didn't know I was on your side? Why, if I hadn't pretended to be civil to that old harri-dan she would have been here now, and we couldn't have had an opportunity of paying her out for all her sins. I say, get off that skinflint of a chair."

He tried tenderly to lift her to the ground, but the child, strong in her promise to obey—a promise given silently, but none the less solemnly, as Miss MacGillicuddy knew—clung persistently to it.

"Oh, I can't," she said, sobbing vehemently, "I daren't. She would find me out."

"She couldn't."

"She could, though. You don't know her. She would ask me directly she came back if I had stirred before the time."

"Well?" There was something so airy and innocent about Mr. Barry's voice as he asked this that I am glad to say the child failed to comprehend the iniquity of the inquiry.

"Well?" she repeated tearfully, as if puzzled; "well, then, I'd have to tell her, that's all."

She was looking up at him from her stool of repentance with great drowned eyes and a miserably red little nose. The nose was such a thoroughly melancholy affair that it inflamed Mr. Barry's ire against the absent tyrant.

"Would you, though, by Jove?" he said. "What for? Catch me telling her the tru—— Oh! ha! h'm!" He broke off spasmodically, as he caught the child's clear gaze, and read something of wonderment in it that reduced him to order at once, and woke his slumbering conscience, and made him very properly ashamed of himself.

"You mean——" she began, hesitating, as if uncertain:

"Just so; just so," declared he vigorously, with much effusion. "You are right — quite right. Nothing like the truth at all hazards. Give *me* the truth beyond everything. Martyrdom rather than a lie. I feel quite like you. In Limerick, I give you my word, you wouldn't find a falsehood amongst the lot of us."

"Yes," said Norah, who was entirely puzzled now, and so out of the running, that she could only fall back upon the harmless monosyllable that means, as occasion offers, so much or so little.

"I say," said Mr. Barry, "do you think you can keep yourself from falling asleep, and tumbling off that consumptive old chair, whilst I make a run for the village? If so, I bet you a chip to a pony, that **we** circumvent the old cat yet."

He was gone as he spoke. Norah sat on, speechless, oppressed, with a sense of even greater loneliness now upon her. Constantia was at Araglin, the boys at the Rectory, stumbling through their Latin primer, and George was in Dublin. Now her last friend, Barry, had deserted her. Where had he gone? And for what? Would he return? What ~~was~~ that word he had used—"circumbent?" How did a man "circumbent" a cat? Did it hurt? Was Aunt Bridget the cat in question?

She had not altogether come to the end of these secret interrogations, and had not so much as decided

whether, in the event of its being proved that "circumbenting" *did* hurt, she would be glad or sorry to see her aunt made a victim of it, when Mr. Barry once more arrived upon the scene, rushing tumultuously into the room, carrying in his hand the largest paper bag that Norah had ever seen.

There was solace, nay, there was joy in the very look of that bag. It was composed of a light-brown paper, and had "Moriarty, Confectioner," printed on it in big, bold letters. It was plain that Moriarty was not ashamed of herself, and, indeed, there was no reason why she should be. She was the cake and lollipop lady of the village, and well deserved the renown that was hers. She was dear to the hearts of the youth of the parish, who, at any time, would have been ready to raise (pocket-money permitting) a statue, more imposing even than Mr. Peabody's, in her honour.

Norah opened her eyes wide, and coloured warmly.

"Now I think we have the old lady," said Barry gaily. "They are piping hot, I can tell you, just out of the oven; I waited for them, or I'd have been here sooner. I have my doubts about that troublesome old tart there," with terrible irony, "being quite as good as *these*!"

He placed the bag upon the child's lap, and opened the mouth of it. A fragrant steam ascended. Norah, but a baby in years as yet, was not proof against it. The sorrow died from her eyes, her lips parted in an expectant smile.

"It's jam puffs!" she said, in a delighted whisper.

"That's what Miss Moriarty said. But how can we be sure of her truth until we put a tooth into one of them? See now, d'ye think you'll be able to get through the bag in the specified sixty minutes?—fifty now, by Jove!"

"Oh, no!" said Norah, with a laugh; it was a bag, as I have said, of a goodly size. "Two," shyly, "I should like. And—and there are the boys—they are always starving when they come home from their lessons; and there is Connie!"

"Connie! Does she like tarts?"

"Loves them!" said Norah, with emphasis.

"Good heavens! why didn't you tell me that before?" He seemed stricken with self-remorse. That she should love such simple things, and yet be without them! It almost amounted to a crime. He recovered himself in a moment, however, seeing Norah's inquisitive, if puzzled glance. "Two!" he said. "Pouf! what folly!"

"Three, then," modestly.

"Make it the decent half-dozen when you are about it," advised Mr. Barry genially, seating himself on the edge of the table, "and I'll keep the rest here until you are ready to cry for the seventh."

Norah, nothing loath, fell upon a dainty tartlet, and soon reduced it to a crumb or two. Whereupon Barry, who had also been regaling himself, solemnly handed her a second. This, too, went the way of all flesh; then a third, a fourth, a little, *very* light, conversation accompanying their demolition.

It was a silent feast, but, on the whole, perhaps one of the pleasantest half-hours the child had ever spent. Miss MacGillicuddy's welcome absence; Barry's presence; the feeling that he was her friend, that he had taken her part; the happy thought that finally she would have the remaining tartlets (there were a couple of dozen of them) to give to the boys and her Con, all made her heart light.

"I say, old girl, you needn't hurry. There is lots of time yet," said Barry, as he handed over the fifth tart.

"Suppose," said Norah, a rush of the old terror seizing on her, "suppose she should come back now. To catch you here with the cakes—giving them to me."

"Well, let her," said he valiantly. "D'ye think I'm afraid of her? She's a reg'lar old sweep, that I allow, but I'm as good as her any day."

Whether it quite came home to him that he was calling *himself* "a reg'lar old sweep" too, Norah had no means of judging. But she could not refrain from a mild little cackle.

"Ah! you laugh at me," said Barry, shaking

his fist at her, "but you shall see. You shall live to see me floor that Tartar yet!" He grew quite excited in his argument. He placed his palms on the table on which he had perched himself, and jerked himself up and down. "What!" cried he, "you saucy puss, d'ye imagine I should shrink before her? D'ye think such as she could conquer me? Have I not as good a courage as another? Lives there the one who has witnessed my overthrow——"

Even as he spoke he lost his balance, and fell off the table on to the floor, made a wild but ineffectual grab at a chair that meanly eluded him, barked his shins against a crazy ottoman, and finally came to anchor upon the sofa *and the bag* with such an overwhelming crash as reduced the dozen and three remaining farts to one.

"By jingo! I went that at a rattling pace," groaned he when he had put his joints together again, and had leisure to rub an elbow that was considerably the worse for wear; then he looked at Norah. But that ungrateful person was incapable of administering consolation by reason of her mirth. She had broken, indeed, into uproarious laughter, that Providence alone prevented from reaching the village school-house below, where her aunt was presumably addressing the Blue Ribbonites. She laughed and laughed again, until Barry, catching the infection, joined in with her, and they both roared in concert, until you would think this merriment of theirs might wake the dead, could such a terrible thing be. Both he, indeed, and she were speechless with mirth, when the door slowly opened to admit Miss MacGilllicuddy.

So far as Norah was concerned the effect was magical. The child froze; the smile died on her lips; her eyes started from her head. But to Mr. Barry the entrance of the tyrant at this supreme moment seemed but the correct finale to the joke. He roared on with even greater enjoyment than before, merrily, unrestrainedly, whilst Miss MacGilllicuddy stood still in the middle of the room and glared at him.

"What is the meaning of all this?" she said. "Is

it thus you keep that wicked girl in order? What have you been doing? Why are my chairs upset?"

She waited for an answer, but none came. Norah could not and Barry would not give her an explanation.

"Speak, sir," cried the spinster, her voice rising shrill with indignation. "What have you been doing? I insist upon an immediate answer."

"Leap-frog, ma'am," returned Barry the irrepressible, still laughing as if his heart would break. Then he turned to Norah, lifted her off her high chair and pushed her towards the door. "Run," he said kindly. "Your term is up. I give you your ticket-of-leave—cut!"

Norah took the hint, caught up the crushed bag (even then she didn't forget the little brothers), and darted like a swallow from the room.

Miss MacGillicuddy stood firm, and looked at Barry.

"That was an excellent word you used," she said. "I thank you for it. Let me repeat it for your benefit—Cut!"

CHAPTER XX.

SHOWING HOW MR. STRONGE TOOK A PRECIOUS BURDEN IN HIS ARMS FOR A MOMENT, AND THEN RELINQUISHED IT FOR EVER.

HE got out of the house, still laughing, and took his homeward way. He had come there in a highly sentimental mood, with his heart full of Constantia, and with a desire to gain from her some word of hope. But he had forgotten all about it by this time, and was now in the wildest spirits—so mercurial was his temperament. He took the path that led to the highway, and so missed Constantia, who was on the lower pathway that led to the woods of Grange. She often wandered there, not in hope of seeing its

master—as Featherston, though her place and his adjoined, never knew of her solitary walks there—but because the poverty of the shrubberies that surrounded The Cottage oppressed her, forbidding thought, and a great longing for the dreamy silence of the dense woods drew her to them. Only a little brawling, angry brook, now flushed and noisier than usual, because of last night's rain, divided her from these wished-for retreats; but as she came close to the brink, she found the stepping-stones had disappeared—buried beneath the savage little flood that came tumbling down from the hills above her. The old landmarks were covered or swept away, and how was she to find her way into the beloved woods?

As she stood, puzzled and perplexed, and grievously disappointed, she saw Stronge coming towards her, on the opposite side of the broad stream, walking quickly through the green paradise as though dead to its budding beauties.

He rather sank in her estimation, as this lack of appreciation of all that she held sweetest became apparent to her. How could he hurry through the lovely woods without a glance right or left at all their gorgeous colouring? Was he so material that he could think of nothing save things mundane?

She wronged him overmuch, however. He was hurrying to see her. He lost his hold on the beauties of nature round him, because before his eyes there was pictured a vision of her that blotted out all the rest. Somehow, when she found how his face lit up when he saw her, she, being a woman, forgave all his sins.

“Oh, how am I to get across?” she cried; and then blushing, as she remembered he was probably coming to The Cottage, and that therefore she had no right to dream of a visit to the woods when her guest required her, she continued hastily, “you are coming to see us? Come, then.”

“I was coming to see you,” said he plainly. He had heard of the Blue Ribbon lecture in the village, and knowing it would be nothing without Miss MacGillicuddy's support, and that therefore she would

surely be absent from The Cottage, had elected to pay one of his cherished visits to Constantia on this day. "But why waste the minutes indoors?" he went on, divining her desire to enter the woods behind him. "May I not pay my visit to you here as well as there?" he indicated The Cottage by a glance.

"You may, indeed," said Constantia, laughing. "But are we to talk commonplaces at the top of our lungs across this terrible little stream? I confess I do not see how I am to get to you, or you to me."

Stronge looked up and down the stream. It might be waded, of course, but he did not dare suggest to her that it would be possible for him to carry her across; and narrow though the stream was, he could see no means of landing her on the other side without getting her feet wet. Just as his puzzlement grew into despair, he saw a large stone, a considerable distance farther down, that he thought would serve.

"Walk down your bank a little way, and I think I shall be able to help you across," he said; and Constantia, catching a glimpse of the stone with her bright eyes, hurried towards it.

Reaching it, Stronge made a spring and alighted on it. It was hardly in mid-stream, being considerably nearer to Constantia's bank than to his. He stretched out his hand to her.

"Now, be careful. Take time. Trust to me. And when I say 'Now,' jump," said he.

Constantia grasped his hand. She took time—she was careful—in fact, she followed all his directions; and when he said "now," she jumped. It seemed quite an easy thing to her to do, but when her feet touched the stone, she found it damp and slippery, and she would probably have fallen into the water had not Stronge caught her in his arms. A moment steadied her, and then they both laughed a little, and Constantia blushed warmly, and a little quick, shy light came into her eyes that made his pulses throb.

But the danger was not over yet. Stronge was

glad of this—absurdly glad—but *she* was not. There was no repugnance to him in her heart, however, there was only a very natural fear and dislike of getting immersed in water with all one's clothes on. She clung tightly to Stronge's arm, and from their desolate island looked across at the promised land before them.

"I'll never do it," she said. "It is twice as long as the last jump, and only for you I should now be as drenched as a mermaid."

"If you will only shut your eyes, and spring when I tell you, all will be right," said he.

"You have great faith in yourself," said Constantia, laughing. "Well, if it must be, it must. We certainly can't stand here all day."

She didn't shut her eyes, however. Stronge passed his arm firmly round her waist.

"When I say three," said he, "spring. Now, are you ready? One, two, three!"

In another moment she found herself on the opposite bank, high and dry, and triumphant.

"What a strong man!" she thought to herself, and looked up at him with eyes full of honest admiration. "How well you did that!" she said aloud. "I am more obliged to you than you know. I had set my heart upon a rambling excursion to-day, and but for you I could not have managed it."

But he required no thanks. He had held her in his arms, not once but twice, and his whole soul was full of happiness. Oh, if she could only love him! If he might dare speak! Would she listen—now in this softened mood of hers, with that sweet light in her eyes—a light for him, now, at least?

"I am not a coward, you must know," she was saying in her gay, pretty voice; "but I confess there was a moment when my spirit quailed. You must confess, however, I was very obedient. I showed a high appreciation of your character. You said, 'Trust me,' and I did, though I believed in my inmost heart that a damp grave yawned for me."

To him, at all events, she was the prettiest creature in the world, as she looked up at him with her fearless

eyes (alas! too fearless for love to dwell in them), and made a pretty fun of him in her light-hearted way. All at once, he never knew how, he laid his heart bare to her, and threw himself upon her mercy. Yet even in this supreme moment, filled, too, of impulse, so calm, so controlled was the man's nature, that he spoke in a clear, unimpassioned, if very earnest tone.

"You *could* trust me then," he said, a faint quiver in his voice alone betraying the terrible agitation he was feeling. "It was but a little thing, Constantia, and yet you trusted. Could you trust me for ever—for all your life? I love you. There is no need to say that, I think; but yet it pleases me to say it aloud. I love you. Will you marry me?"

It was the baldest thing imaginable. There was nothing romantic about it—nothing likely to catch a young girl's sense of the fitness of all such matters. He felt that, when he had finished; but he had said all that he could say just then, and waited, breathless but apparently calm, for her answer. How could she tell, so quiet he was, that the answer meant life or death to him, so far as the happiness of all the years to come was concerned?

She grew very pale, and a little trembling shook her. She had a very tender heart, and to give pain to any one was to give great pain to herself. She raised her eyes to his with such an anguish of trouble and regret in them, that he was smitten by it. She tried to speak, but he stopped her. Why should he be the one to cause her suffering, even of this mild kind?

"I know," he said quickly, suppressing his own wounds—nay, losing sight of them in his fear for hers. "I know all you would say. Do not distress yourself. You could not like me well enough, then, you think?"

"No. Not in that way," said she. Her pallor forsook her as speech came, and now she grew crimson, and heavy tears rose and shone in her large, distressed eyes.

"Well, never mind," said he cheerfully. What an assumption of cheerfulness it was! "I didn't

really think you could, you know, only it has been on my mind for so long, and I—I thought I'd get it over, so that I might never have to worry myself again with a pretence of believing that you—that is, that it—might have been otherwise."

His heart sank in his body, as he realised that now indeed that sweet doubt could never be again; that all was over, done; that she would be naught to him, ever any more. But he conquered himself as he saw her drooping head, and sad face, and went on hurriedly:

"It really is not worth another thought of yours. You must put it all out of your head at once, because for all the happiness the earth could give me I would not be the cause of even one tear in your eyes." Her eyes were very full as he spoke, and the tears hurt him at the instant with a physical pain. "Don't look like that," he went on nervously. "And yet I know it is kind of you. By-and-by, perhaps, I shall like to remember that you shed a tear for me, but now—it is terrible to me."

"I suppose," said she in a low tone, her eyes on the ground, "it would do you no good to tell you how I like you."

"Yes, it would," he said eagerly, anxious to comfort her. "And—and you mustn't think it is as bad with me as with some people, because you see I never had much hope—never any really, I think. And besides——" He paused. He did not finish that sentence. "Well, that is all over, I suppose," he said. "But I am not sorry I spoke. There was no hope, ever. I knew I was not much in your sight, that you regarded me as a plain man, as——"

He paused, struck by a lightning glance she cast at him—a horrified glance. She put up her hand deprecatingly, and her face flushed crimson. Her thoughts had flown backward to that unlucky day, when he had overheard her as she descanted upon his utter lack of personal charms. In spite of the dejection that was fast making him its prey, a smile crossed his face.

"I wasn't thinking of that," he said. "I can guess

your thoughts, but it wasn't plain in that sense I meant—only commonplace, ordinary, uninteresting."

Constantia was still very red.

"I shall never forget that day," she said. "It has come back to me so often since; and always it has caused me regret. It was so rude, and besides—untrue." This she said very sincerely. She had grown to like him so well of late, that he no longer seemed ugly. "No, I shall never forget that day," she said.

"Why should you?" said he gently. "I shall never forget it either."

She looked at him reproachfully. "Is that kind, is that generous?" she murmured.

"It has nothing to do with kindness or generosity. It is only that I shall never forget any day or hour with which you have had to do." He spoke very simply, and without any demonstrative emotion, yet she knew how thoroughly he meant every word he said. "I shall be even less likely to forget after this interview; my memory will be all I shall have to live upon."

"You will not go away?" said she quickly; there was undeniable regret in her tone. His face flushed.

"Not if you wish me to remain—not if I can be of any use to you." He regarded her very earnestly. Yes, certainly she had seemed sorry at the thought of his departure. "Constantia, are you sure of yourself?" he went on hurriedly; "would time do nothing for me? We are friends already; you like me. After a while, perhaps, you would learn to regard me in a warmer light." Then some words rushed to his lips and passed through before he had time to weigh them: "I could do a good deal for the children."

He stopped short abruptly. When it was said, the bribe offered, he was honestly ashamed of himself; he would have given the world to recall it, but it was too late. He lowered his eyes and waited, conscience-stricken, for her rebuke on this his first mean action.

"I know," she said gently. "I know, too, that many girls would think it almost their duty to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their brothers and sisters;

but—I am not one of them. I would not marry a man unless I loved him, for even the children; it would be unfair, I think, to myself and,” softly, “to the man, too.”

“I suppose so.” He agreed with her outwardly, but he nevertheless gave her the impression that he would gladly have taken her, had she given herself to him, notwithstanding the unfairness. He would have risked that.

“You would not have me marry you unless I loved you?” she asked, a little impatiently.

“It would not be the way, of course, to ensure your happiness.”

“Nor yours either.”

He was silent; then, after quite a minute:

“I am sorry I made you that speech,” he said.

“Do not regret it,” entreated she, very sweetly. “Indeed, it does not matter at all; it seems to me to be such a natural thing to say. Why not? Why should not Norah and the boys influence me?”

“Ah, that is just it,” exclaimed he remorsefully. “I would have influenced you through them—through your love, your devotion to them. There lay the baseness, the selfishness of my words. I am glad they had no effect upon you.”

“No,” she said, “that is true; they could not touch me in that way. I could not give myself away like that. I could starve with those I loved; I could not betray myself for them. And, besides, I should wrong them if I believed for one moment that they would have it so. Oh, no, I am wise, indeed.” Her tone had grown tremulous, but now she drew her breath sharply and became quite calm again. “We are poor people,” she went on lightly; “yet still we seem to pull on somehow. We are always on the brink, as it were, and some day I expect we shall take a header and never come to the surface again; but still I prefer risking such total extinction to—to—selling myself!”

“I understand. You are right, quite right,” he said. “All along, indeed, I understood you well

enough to know that no temptation I could hold out would move you. It was a miserable mistake, my saying what I did."

"Do not let that trouble you," cried she eagerly. "Why should you not have shown the children to me, why not have brought them face to face with me and the good that through me you could have done them? You sought to gain your own end. That was quite fair. In your case"—with a kindly desire to make him once more comfortable with himself—"I should have said or done *anything* to gain a cause that was dear to me."

Then she thought she had said too much, had laid too great value on the gaining of herself, and blushed deeply.

"It was the dearest cause in the world. It was the only cause I really care to gain," returned he, with a sigh. Yet in a sense she had comforted him. If the word "happy" could be applied to him just then, he certainly felt the happier because of her words, and the assurance they gave him that she did not despise him for the suggestion he had held out. "Well!" he said, after a bit. "You were anxious for a quiet walk here, and I have only disturbed you with my idle dreams. I will bid you good-bye now, and let you have at least one hour in peace." He smiled and held out his hand.

"But it is only good-bye for the moment; you have said you will not go away," said she, slipping her fingers trustfully into his. She seemed anxious, fearful. If he went, a good friend would go from her, and some instinctive feeling that he would be wanted here in their little community sooner or later awoke in her breast.

"Of course I shall stay, I have given you my word. And why should I run away? I am no coward," he said, very bravely. Then he parted from her, and turning a leafy corner was soon out of sight.

He walked on heavily, hardly knowing why it was that his heart was so dull within him. He knew he was no longer the possessor of even a fainting hope

such as had sustained him for many weeks, but as yet he could only think of her, how she had looked, what she had said.

She had not returned his gaze when he was going. Rather, her eyes had sought the ground as if in regret and sorrow. He was glad of those signs of gentle grief; they told him that at least she had felt for him. It was a great kindness in her that she had thus shrunk from meeting his parting glance. She knew there would be despair in it. It was a warm and honest heart that lay in her sweet bosom—a heart that had suffered a little for the poor wretch it had been obliged to condemn.

There was, too, some melancholy satisfaction for him in the thought that he had borne his defeat with considerable spirit. He had, to support him, the assurance that he had quitted her presence with a calm bearing—not as one crushed or humiliated. Why, indeed, should his rejection by such a kindly creature cause humiliation of any sort? Is a man lowered because one woman out of the whole universe does not find him exactly to her taste? No, it was foolish, and yet he could not help feeling glad that he had left her carrying with him so undaunted an exterior.

This inward gratification sustained him until a turn of the road, on which he now found himself, revealed to him the somewhat pronounced features of Garrett Barry. He started slightly, as one might who was suddenly roused from an engrossing train of thought, and stood still in the middle of the road. This was nothing, however, as Barry was walking with such velocity that as he turned the corner the two men came to a stand almost breast to breast.

Hitherto Mr. Stronge had believed himself to be as calm outwardly as any one could desire. With Barry lay the pleasure of undeceiving him. The first shock of the encounter at an end, Barry regarded him with a searching gaze.

“I say, anything wrong with you, old man?” asked that youth, with apparently deep concern, peering into his face. “You look as if you had got a twist somewhere.”

"So I have," said Stronge, with some presence of mind. "It's—er—toothache."

"No, now! And is it that, that's the matter with you?" said the Limerick man, with a curious twinkle in his eye. "Faith, it's a bad job, by the look of you. There can't be anything much worse in the world than the toothache *you've* got."

"A toothache is always a bad thing," replied Stronge stiffly.

"Incurable, unless you get the tooth out."

"That's easier said than done."

"In your case, do you mean?" Barry, who, as a rule, was a kind-hearted young man, here laughed aloud in an almost fiendish joy. "If that's the way with you," said he, still laughing, "I'd advise you to go home and cut your throat, for there is no cure known for your disease."

"Disease! I've told you it is toothache," said Stronge indignantly, not liking his laugh or his fixed gaze.

"Well, just so." He nodded to him, and went on a step or two. Then he stopped, and looked back at him over his shoulder. "Even if you had that tooth out," he said, "I doubt if you would feel much better."

He continued his way after that, and Stronge was once more left to his own communings. It seemed to him now that Barry had guessed his secret. And, indeed, no doubt he had, jealousy and unrequited love having sharpened that young man's wits.

Sadly, slowly Stronge walked onwards, alive, indeed, to the knowledge that a great ill had befallen him, but hardly realising to its fullest the extent of it. Not until he had reached his home and entered the hall, and wandered listlessly into the huge drawing-room on the right-hand side of it, did he quite comprehend how completely life for him had been bereft of its flavour.

Here, in this large, exquisitely-furnished reception-room, where in his happy musings he had seen her welcoming her guests; and there, in the pretty morning-room beyond, where he, perchance, and she alone might have sat in pleasant converse; and in the

dainty octagon nest upstairs, all gray and silver, that her sweet preseuce might have graced; he had pictured her to himself a thousand times as wandering through all these rooms, their mistress, his queen! And such imaginings had been very sweet to him. But now he must dash his brush across all his pictures, leaving the canvas blank as his own heart!

CHAPTER XXI.

SHOWING HOW "WHEN WINE FLOWETH, DISSENSION
GROWETH."

"He is a very nice fellow, at all events—thoroughly unexceptionable," said O'Grady, looking up from his cards for a moment. He addressed his host, who nodded in acquiescence, if rather coldly.

Barry was giving one of his little dinners—bachelor entertainments that were seldom declined by the men in the country round. His wine, left to him with the property by one of the greatest counoisseurs in that line that his time knew, was, naturally, irreproachable, and his cook was excellent. After dinner there would be a game of Nap or (so-called?) limited loo, that very seldom, however, knew any limit by the time the small hours began. However, as it commenced decorously, it was allowed to hold its good character all through; and it was found to be well to be able always to prefix the word limited to it when talking of the nights at Barry's house to one's wife.

Nearly everybody was present, and as midnight was upon them, just now the limit had been waived aside. Stronge, however, was absent; he had gone to England, where some one belonging to him lay at the point of death, and his name having fallen lightly upon the conversation going on in a desultory fashion round the card-table, O'Grady, who had taken

a fancy to him, said a panegyric word or two about him.

"Yes, he is quite all right; he is really astonishing," said Featherston, in his slow drawl. "There isn't a flaw in him barring his birth."

"Ah, that's where the screw is loose, I hear," said Twining, with a little affected shrug of his capacious shoulders. He was the major of the line regiment stationed in the next town. His own father was an eminent soap-boiler in the North of England, so that naturally he was very hard on the want of proper breeding, when with those who knew nothing of his antecedents. "His mother was a Jewess, I hear," he went on, with quite an astonishing display of disgust. "His father was an Irishman, and—er—— Beg pardon, Barry, I'm sure," with an apologetic laugh; "no offence meant." He shrugged his shoulders again in that exquisitely graceful foreign way he had learnt in his fortnight's sojourn at Boulogne.

"Where would it come in, I'd like to know?" asked Barry, with a slight touch of contempt. He evidently held the major in sure contempt, but let him down easy because of his being a guest.

"His pappy a Paddy; his mammy a Jew! What a remarkable combination!" said Varley. He had been losing pretty steadily, but this only served to send his spirits up. "By Jove, one should look for a startling result in a union of that sort."

"I don't think Stronge could be called exactly startling," said Featherston meditatively. He said very little, yet he conveyed to every one the impression that he considered Stronge hardly worth an argument.

"I knew the grandfather on the mother's side, and he wasn't half a bad old chap," said some one.

"So did I," said Varley, with a gay laugh. "In the old days."

"Dickens a bit I'd doubt you!" said Barry, with a genial grin, giving him a poke unawares. "Der monish tight just then?"

"Wrong, my trusty friend! I had no dealings with him in that way; but I believe he let in Stronge's father for a good deal, and only loosened

his grip on him when he had promised to marry his girl. Old Stronge, caught in the toils, did marry her. There is nothing like honour—when you are stuck for it! So runs the tale; and the Stronge we know is the upshot of the transaction.”

“Poor devil!” said Barry.

“Whom are you pitying, Barry?” asked Major Twining; “your compatriot—by the one side, at all events—Stronge, eh?”

“His father. I’d pity any fellow you could name who was bound to marry the girl he didn’t love. Flat soda would be nothing to it.”

“You’re an Irishman, you see, Barry. And you therefore count the world well lost for that ancient humbug called love.”

“Well, I do!” said Barry stoutly. He thought of Constantia, and his heart swelled within him. “And why shouldn’t I?” he said. “And why should you English sneer at Ireland? There’s bad in it, as all we landlords know to our cost; but there is good, too. Enough to make all of you on the other side of the water deeply grateful to us. Who has given you your only general——”

“Gineral, Garrett—be Irish at all risks,” said Varley gaily.

“By all means, my dear fellow, if you think it sounds better,” said Barry, with undiminished good-humour. “Who gave you your only ‘gineral,’ then,” he went on, returning his attention to Twining—“as you yourselves have styled him? Who gave you your Indian Viceroy? Is General Roberts nothing to you? Faith,” cried Barry, throwing up his head, “it strikes me you would be in a blue fix over there in your native land without a few Irish brains to stiffen you now and again, and pull you together.”

“Hah!” said Twining, with a kind of a snort that meant defiance. He was angry, but could think of nothing sufficiently brilliant to crush his antagonist. He came of a slow race. Soap, though a cleanly thing, is not suggestive of eloquence.

Varley, who had had a good deal of the defunct proprietor’s old wine, laughed aloud.

"There is a good deal of truth in what you say, Garrett," he said gaily, flinging an I O U into the pool. "'We are a happy family, we are, we are.' But when enumerating our celebrities, you might have given a little place to our prince of diplomatists, our dear——"

"Name him not!" cried Barry tragically. "Traitor! Usurer! Base receiver of a starving nation's pence! '*À la lanterne!*' would be my cry for such as he, could it do any good. The peasants lie dying of starvation on the roadside and in the gutters, whilst he revels in the thousands wrung from their hearts' blood."

"Well done, Barry, that last is far better than the orthodox 'sweat of their brow,'" said Varley, with a mischievous laugh. "And, indeed, these dear peasants deserve our best consideration. When one comes to think of the boycotting, the playful assassinations, the merry maiming of the dumb beasts around us, one feels one's heart quite warm towards our gentle aborigines."

"I have confessed to the badness, you know," said Barry. "I have not denied that, when I spoke of the good; and you will at least admit that the lower classes would still be a mild and light-hearted race in spite of their grinding poverty, ay, and a loyal-hearted people too, were it not for the diabolical agencies that strive every now and then to stir up the mud of sedition."

"Bravo, Barry, go it!" cried two or three junior members of the regiment commanded by Twining. They were all Englishmen, and consequently looked upon Barry's partially impassioned speech as rather a good joke.

Mr. Dundas, who was not at the card-table, but who was playing a game of billiards with one of the neighbouring squires, looked up suddenly.

"I am of your way of thinking," he said to Barry in his quiet way, that somehow silenced the youngsters. "There is only this difference between us: you have hope, I have none." He alluded to his unhappy land; but Varley glanced at him with a curious light in

his eyes, and then suddenly broke into a low, secret laugh.

"I would have hope," declared Barry hotly, "had England, who should be our mainstay, any sympathy with us; but in reality she has none. She blusters considerably about the disintegration of the empire, and the insult to the Queen, and the loss of her own personal dignity; but honest regard for the loyal subjects in this miserable island there is none. I lived long enough in England to learn that."

"You lived there?" asked Twining, with some surprise.

"For two long years," replied Barry, with an unconscious stress upon the adjective.

"No doubt, considering the vast possibilities for sensational changes here, you found it slow," said Twining, who was nettled by the other's tone.

"Well, 'twas a trial, I don't deny that," said Barry coolly, twisting and lighting a cigarette, "but I learned the ropes pretty soon, and learned, too, to endure it. I'm a happy-go-lucky sort of fellow when all is told, and I squared the slowness in no time. But I don't conceal from you," with a comical glance, "that I felt it was a merciful interposition of Providence that induced my uncle to die and leave me a property that restored me to Irish soil once more."

"My dear fellow, you ought to be a leader of the Irish crew instead of a looker-on. To see most of the game isn't always everything. The excitement is lacking, for one part, and then there is the gilded recompense."

"'Tis a land in a thousand," said Varley. "Most patriots get beggary for their pains and live to rot in garrets, but in this poor, down-trodden land they think nothing of getting, every now and then, thirty thousand pounds or so as a gentle encouragement to go on and prosper. When the drama has drawn to a close, the principal mover in it can retire on his laurels and his thousands and live happy ever after in virtuous Louisiana."

"'Tis a burning shame," Barry was beginning with all the air of one who was about to hold forth for an

hour or so, when Varley, who detested political discussions, broke into the conversation.

"I hear you have changed the name of your place, Barry," he said.

"Well, yes. Belleisle, the old man called it. There's a name for an Irish home! I've rechristened it, however, and succeeded in making it partly decent. Shanakill, now! What d'ye think of that? Sounds a deal pleasanter, eh? What's your glass dry for, Varley? What d'ye mean by it? Well, and don't you all agree with me that Shanakill is the better name of the two, eh?"

"Where on earth did you get it?" asked O'Grady, who was amused.

"Inspiration, sir, and a touch of natural talent. You forget, perhaps, that I'm one of the Barrys of Derrygra, who never yet were known to be without an idea on any subject under the sun."

"Never heard of them," said Twining, with a smirk.

"No? Really now? Never heard of the Barrys of Derrygra? I'm sorry for you. It argues uncommon badly for you, let me tell you; and shows what a poor footing you have made in decent society."

He laughed so gaily that no one could accept the speech as offensive, but to Twining, who was of such questionable parentage, the words were objectionable. Everybody laughed with Barry, however, so he could hardly do otherwise. Varley, who had been very assiduous in his attentions to the champagne on the small table at his elbow, gave way to uproarious mirth.

"'Dacent,' Garrett," he cried. "Why imitate the hated Sassenach? Let us have the good broad Irish whilst we may."

"Anything to please you, my dear boy," said Barry, shrugging his shoulders, after a brief glance at the flushed countenance of his guest.

"To 'plaze ye,' an you love me, Garrett," persisted Varley, leaning back in his chair, his mirth taking a half-insolent meaning.

O'Grady looked full at him, and his lip curled. A feeling of shame and disgust mingled took possession of his breast. So this was her husband, this wine-filled, jeering jester! Barry, however, still kept his temper.

"The devil himself wouldn't 'plaze' you, it seems to me," he said good-humouredly.

"'Divil,' Garrett. 'Divil,' I entreat you," said Varley, who had lost himself considerably, and, indeed, hardly knew what he was saying. Barry made a little swift, indescribable movement, but before he could say anything, O'Grady laid his hand upon his arm.

"For an Irishman to quarrel with another Irishman on account of his accent, must always be a folly," he said lightly. "But there are greater follies still." He pressed Barry's arm, and the young man, looking at him, let the frown fade from his brow. "He is your guest," whispered O'Grady, with a grave smile, "and that champagne of yours should bear its own share of the blame."

"You're right," said Barry, shaking his head, and following O'Grady peaceably to a distant table where some one was recounting in loud triumph his victory at a moral game of whist.

O'Grady drew a quick breath of relief. He had checked in the bud what might have been a serious outburst—a scandal, in fact, in which Varley would have held a principal part. In imagination he saw her proud lips quiver, her face pale, as this came home to her, and a sensation of gladness, that even thus secretly he had been her champion—had thus saved her some small hurt—made his heart warm.

"Varley is very excitable, very!" said Featherston, addressing him in his slow monotone. "It all comes of that pernicious habit of imbibing stimulating liquors in and out of season."

"I wonder you will admit the possibility of there being a season," said O'Grady, with a slight smile.

"There is ever with us, unhappily, the sick couch," said Featherston solemnly. "Dire diseases at times require violent remedies."

"Is dry Monopole a violent remedy?" asked O'Grady, smiling.

"You shouldn't argue on that point with Featherston," said Barry at the moment; "he is a rigid teetotaller—never touches anything, even in private! Eh, Featherston?"

"Never," replied Featherston in his careful drawl. Barry had fixed his eyes on him in a somewhat determined way, and presently he felt the gaze, and felt also compelled to return it. By degrees his nonchalant air deserted him, and his colour changed. "Never," he said again; but the stern virtue of his former tone was absent now.

O'Grady regarded him curiously.

CHAPTER XXII.

SHOWING HOW MRS. DUNDAS MADE CONSTANTIA A THOUGHTFUL PRESENT, AND HOW THE LATTER HURT SORELY A HEART THAT LOVED HER.

MRS. DUNDAS (in spite of certain small compensations) began to feel her life in the little conventional Irish place in which her present lot was cast, decidedly stupid. She looked about her, therefore, to find an outlet for the overplus of vitality within her, that was always ready to burst forth, and finally electrified the quiet country-side by sending out invitations for a masked ball.

There had been a little trouble at first with Mr. Dundas. He had rather hung back from seconding the idea, regarding it as an affair in a degree too startling to find favour in the eyes of a specially unsophisticated neighbourhood. But she had cajoled, and coaxed, and wheedled, and finally tormented him into giving his consent.

Accordingly, the gilt and perfumed cards of in-

visitation were filled up and despatched to every house that was not altogether impossible in the county.

If a bombshell had been discharged into each of these rather Puritanical homes, it could hardly have created a greater astonishment. The heads put on their spectacles and regarded the gilded messenger again, holding it out well from them, as if a little afraid of it. Would it go off?

It was such a strange, such an unusual thing! One had heard of it, of course, and it suggested Venice at once, and another word beginning with V they did not like to mention before the youngsters, which was vice. A great many old Italian stories, as stupid as they were highly flavoured, returned to them, as they pondered over the innocent bit of card. A masked ball! Here in Ireland! It was out of place, and very absurd, but that was hardly the question. Was it correct; was it respectable; was there not an element of impropriety about it? They were full of fears for their ducklings.

There was, indeed, much debating on the subject, and many hesitations, but finally the young people, who were longing to see themselves in some way connected with another, and—as they believed—a wicked world than theirs, persuaded them that an acceptance should be sent.

Even after that, however, numerous difficulties arose. There were some who did not know how to set about getting the requisite masks and dominoes; there were a few who, believing blindly in their dictionaries, thought a domino was simply a dress of abnormal length; and there were still another few who had grown up in the belief that dominoes were bits of ivory, with black spots on them, with which immoral Frenchmen played a wild and reckless game over their *café noir*, which in itself was suggestive of much fast living. These last were greatly at sea.

Each and all went to Mrs. Dundas, presumably to pay her a visit, but in reality to cull from her some word of advice. That she saw through the simple artifice need not be said, and straightway she set them

in the right path. She was graciousness itself, even to those undesirable ones who sat upon the confines of society, and were just in it, because they were not out of it. A tip would have sent them over at any moment.

She was charming to every one, high and low; told some where dominoes were to be had; others how they could be made by the local talent. For this purpose she lent an old one of her own, which she said had seen service at a ball given by the Princesse Dolgorouky during the carnival, the year beforelast. She made quite a point by lending this domino. It was received with much elation. A real domino, that seemed to their eager imagination steeped in the sunny warmth of vine-clad Italy, was precious in their sight; and worn, too, in the palace—was it palazzo?—of a princess! “Princesse,” she had called it—that seemed to give an additional flavour to it.

Donna herself seemed delighted with her latest whim. She talked of it by the hour to these anxious visitors. “They would come? Oh yes, they *must*. It would be such fun. Very harmless fun, of course. Harmless to dulness, but still, perhaps, a trifle less dull than the usual thing.”

They were all to keep on the masks and dominoes until midnight struck; then, like Cinderella, their false garments were to slip from them, and they should stand revealed as they really were. All this jugglery business seemed enchanting to the girls, and filled them full of delight for many days beforehand.

In an interview with Constantia, Donna had declared her intention of providing her pretty cousin with a domino that should surpass all others, as a little gift from friend to friend. Such delicate articles became clumsy wraps beneath the fingers of country milliners. Even Constantia’s little digits, clever as they undoubtedly were, would be unequal to the task.

Constantia demurred. She blushed warmly. She could not, she said, allow Donna to—to——

“Be at the expense of it? Tut!” said Donna airily. She curled up her lovely lips, and looked

supreme contempt. Was that really it? Why, she was ordering half-a-dozen, at least, for as many distressed damsels, and why should she not do as much for Constantia, who was her cousin, and had therefore some claim upon her? Piff! paff! stuff and nonsense! The thing *was*; it was settled, arranged—at all events, it should be; and so let there be no more folly about it. A country idiot of a dress-maker might do very well for half that were coming; but for Constantia! No; she, Donna, would not hear of it. A really pretty girl was always of so much more consequence than an ordinary one.

Constantia finally gave in, feeling, indeed, that she had done something *gauche* and uncivilised in having at first refused the kindly offer of her cousin. She thanked Donna very prettily, who told her she was a dear, proud little goose; and on the evening of the ball, just ten minutes before dressing time, a box arrived for her from Ballymore, containing the mask and domino promised. It contained rather more than these. Beneath the domino lay a pair of wonderful gloves that reached almost to her shoulder, and a fan painted exquisitely, in the style of a by-gone age. Constantia's colour came and went as she looked at the pretty things—prettier trifles than she had ever before possessed in all her sweet if somewhat penniless life.

She donned the domino, and laughed gaily at herself in her glass. Then she put on the mask and laughed once more. When the new, lovely, long gloves had been drawn on and fastened by a little maiden called Norah, who was lost in speechless admiration, she took up the fan, and summoning George, went off to Ballymore.

She entered the large ball-room with a somewhat nervous tread; she could not divest herself of the feeling that all eyes were turned upon her. There was a subdued hum of voices all around, with little breaks of laughter now and again, and the clicking of innumerable fans. Disguised tones met her ear on all sides, whilst she could see that some, deeming a

whisper (as it is) the best method of concealing one's accent, spoke only beneath their breath.

The many-coloured dominoes, the black satin masks, through which the eyes seemed to sparkle like living coals, the subdued light from the lamps, which were purposely lowered, all seemed to Constantia to lend a weird and interesting effect to the scene. The soft strains of the band, which was hidden behind a wall of cool palms and ferns, and the dripping of fountains, appeared blent together in one musical breeze that swayed to and fro, and was full of a curious sadness that was almost ecstasy.

She stood alone, amazed, bewildered, pleased. She had become separated from her brother almost immediately on entering the room; and now, as a strange voice said something low in her ear, she started violently. She had, indeed, been dead to all save the strangeness and glamour of her surroundings, and the sound of her own name brought her back with a disagreeable haste to a sense of every-day existence.

She did not recognise the speaker, in her confusion, and did not look at him. Just at this moment there was a little extra flowing of the human tide in her direction, and she felt herself floated onwards gently but irresistibly, and presently found herself once again without a companion.

She was glad of it. It pleased her, and accorded so well with her silent appreciation of the brilliant spectacle before her, that a sense of being somehow alone, *lost*, came over her. She did not want to speak; she only wanted to watch, and enter into it really, and so impress it upon her heart that she should never forget. She had read many times of such an hour as this, and now she saw it. The windows were all thrown wide open, and the terrace outside lay white in the moonshine. It was but a simple thing to imagine the water below all that, and the gondolas—the mandolins—the rhythmical rise and fall of the oar.

As the many hues and dyes of the dominoes passed before her vision, it occurred to her that there was in

the whole motley crowd no domino like her own. She rather marvelled at this, until a slight movement of the throng nearest to her opened a side alley, at the end of which a glimpse of something brilliant caught her eye. She gazed at it intently. Yes, it was her own domino, exact in every fold and line. But as she looked more intently still, a small difference, and one that would be imperceptible to a casual observer, became clear to her. On her own, at the very tip of the shoulder, near the neck, a tiny Maltese cross had been worked in black filoselle. It was so small as to be barely visible, but on the shoulder of that other domino, down there at the end of the room, her young, sharp sight told her there was nothing.

The yellow figure she was gazing at in some surprise, was as tall as herself; the loose folds of the cloak prevented her seeing whether it was slender, or of a matronly mould. The yellow flowered silk shone and glistened beneath the rays of the soft lamplight, and the wearer, whose mask was very carefully arranged, was leaning against a bank of crimson roses artistically arranged in one of the anterooms.

As Constantia watched her with an ever-growing curiosity, she put out her hand with a little saucy gesture, and at once the girl knew that it was Donna. Some astonishment filled her breast on her discovery, which was succeeded by a touch of grateful feeling. The two dominoes were almost precisely similar. It was specially good of Donna (who had a rooted objection ever to gown herself like other women) to have ordered for her a disguise in no whit inferior to that she had ordered for herself. No suspicion of any latent treachery in the act disturbed her mind. She felt only gratitude, and a little remorse in that she had so often known herself to harbour unkind thoughts of this kindly cousin.

A little wonder crept in, of course. Why were the dominoes the same? If hers had been a pale blue, she would, she imagined, have thought it even lovelier. Yellow was a colour she would scarcely have chosen; but this, her way, would have been her folly, as she noticed how extremely common on all sides were the

pinks and blues and carmines, and that there was literally no yellow save hers and Donna's.

The room was growing insufferably warm, and there was a movement made towards the open windows behind her. This blocked her view of her double at the other end of the room, or, rather, standing just inside an anteroom; and Constantia, roused from her reverie, followed the multitude out of doors into the still, warm night.

She stepped on to the balcony, and, moving down the steps that led to the broad stone terrace below, went over to the parapet, and, leaning her arms upon it, gazed dreamily into the swiftly flowing river down beneath—a small river, an angry, babbling, scolding, noisy little river, the music of which caught and held her, and entered into the strangeness of the scene. She had almost forgotten all but it, when she was roused by a footstep drawing near her. She looked up quickly, and saw that, whoever the new-comer was, he was approaching her with all the air of one who had no doubt about whom he was going to address.

It was a tall figure, looking taller than it really was in the jet-black domino that enshrouded it. But this Constantia did not pause to consider. Her heart throbbed quickly. It seemed to her that this must be Featherston.

Had he seen—followed—recognised her? Ah, if that should be! So would a true lover see through all disguises! The stranger bent over her hand, as she turned suddenly and gazed searchingly upon him. The moon just then had gone behind a cloud, so that only the fact that he was of goodly stature—tall as that one whom she most favoured—was known to her.

“Will you, of your grace, deign to grant me one word?” entreated the unknown in a whisper. She had been waiting impatiently for the voice, but now she felt herself foiled. Still she could feel that there was in the tone, spite of its mockery, a substratum of deepest feeling. If he could feel like that! Happiness is a cordial. Her courage rose.

“One?” she answered playfully, if a little

nervously. "That would be but an ungenerous gift. Surely an—an old friend might demand more than that?"

"I give all. I demand nothing," returned he, still in the low whisper. It occurred to Constantia now that there was an extreme sadness in it. As she wondered at this, he spoke again. "Hope is denied me," he said.

"Faint heart," suggested she gaily still. And then, as the meaning he might place upon her words came home to her, she blushed a warm crimson.

"True," said he. "Yet stout heart, be it never so valiant, may not always win!"

He spoke doubtfully; there was even a suspicion of despair in his tone. It was a tone so new to him, that a soft, low laugh broke involuntarily from Constantia. It seemed so strange to her that he should need encouragement, that he should fear his fate with *her*!

"Is that beyond question?" she asked, looking away from him, and trifling in an absent fashion with her fan. "If the heart be really strong, it should be able to watch and wait for ever. And time, we are told, will melt the most obdurate."

It pleased her thus to allude to herself as "the most obdurate;" it delighted her, and made her glad in her soul that he should thus sue to her, that he should be thus ignorant of how she was already won; it gave great comfort to her girlish sense of the dignity of woman.

Her companion made no answer to her last speech that was but half breathed. He was, however, gazing at her very keenly. This she felt rather than saw, her eyes being on the ground, and the moon still obscured, and the knowledge, though strangely sweet, unnerved her. She stood slim and fair before him, with fingers closely locked, and pretty head down-bent.

"Time! you recommend me time!" he said at last. "You!" And now the whisper was discarded, and his voice rang out clearly on the air. "Do you know what that means to me? Hope!"

With the first sound of his voice, Constantia had started back aghast.

"You, you!" she murmured affrightedly, and nothing more. Words would not come to her. The cloud had rolled heavily away, and now the moon shone out again, lighting up the cold whiteness of the terrace, and specially, as it seemed to the stricken Constantia, that corner of it at which they stood. Stronge could see how her lips quivered, how her shamed and sorrowful eyes avoided his. He understood as perfectly as though she had given speech to the cruel certainty, that that gentle word of hope had not been meant for him. All through she had mistaken him for—— His heart contracted within him. Constantia by a violent effort collected herself, and compelled herself to speak calmly, and without emotion.

"It is indeed a surprise to see you here masquerading," she said, "when I believed you still in Shropshire. To make an affair of this kind altogether successful, half the people asked should think the other half at the other side of the world. When did you return?"

"Too soon!" he said, in a low tone, full of despair. He turned and left her.

Constantia's eyes filled with tears. She made no effort to recall him, feeling it was better he should go. The mistake made had been a thoroughly unfortunate one—bitter to her as to him—but she had not been in fault. It was some faint consolation to know that he would have to acknowledge that to himself. She was full of fear lest he had understood for whom her words were meant. Her brow grew crimson as she tried to recall everything she had said, and wondered with a sickening sense of shame if she had betrayed herself. He knew nothing; it was impossible he could have understood. Surely he thought only that she was answering him idly, without meaning, not knowing who he was, and not dreaming of another.

She had withdrawn into a secluded nook, where a stone seat had been scooped out of the wall. She knelt on this, and once again gazed down into the

rushing stream below her. The rain had fallen heavily last night, and now the tiny thing was swollen beyond its own knowledge, and sang with foolish triumph as it hasted ever onwards to its end. In all her later years Constantia never forgot it, or its wild music, or the mad sparkling of the chilly moonbeams on its breast. She could see it at any moment if she closed her eyes, as well as the great river, its goal, lying far, far away—against the horizon, as it were—placid, motionless.

So calm, the waters scarcely seem to stray;
And yet they glide, like happiness, away.

Was her happiness going? A sad sense of disappointment filled her heart. She had so surely believed that it was he, that the awakening had crushed her spirit. Would a time ever come when, face to face with her, he would declare his love and——

She started convulsively. Again a footstep hurrying towards her, caught her ear; again a disguised figure met her view. But now, *now* there was no room for doubt. She would know that step amongst a thousand. Fool! to have been before unmindful of it. Her face paled, and she rose tremulously to her feet. His voice reached her.

“At last!” he cried softly—*carefully*, as it seemed to her—but with undeniable and very passionate eagerness.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SHOWING HOW THE "THOUGHTFUL PRESENT" FULFILLED ITS MISSION, AND WORKED WOE TO ITS WEARER.

ALL suddenly, in the midst of her gladness, a very innocent but overpowering coquetry took possession of Constantia. Stronge had spoken to her in a whisper, and the ruse had been successful. She, too, would disguise her voice; it seemed to her, indeed, apart from the *espèglerie* of it, a much easier thing, in her present confusion, to speak to Featherston in a fashion thus subdued, than to give her voice to his criticism. She felt, too, an almost childish desire to baffle him for a moment or two, to dally with the happiness that had now surely come to her.

"Sir!" she whispered, drawing back a little, and pretending ignorance.

"It is too late for folly of that sort," said he, with ill-suppressed vehemence. "You know me, as well as I know you. And though for an hour you have skilfully avoided me, yet now I have found you, I *will* be heard."

There was something in his manner that killed the girlish gaiety in her. She placed one hand upon the stone parapet of the terrace, and turned timidly towards him. Perhaps, however, unconsciously to herself, she was a little offended by his vehemence, because instinctively her tall young figure took a rather majestic pose.

"You sought to hide yourself from me—to deceive me," he went on in a sort of angry agitation; "but I watched, and waited, and *now*—is my reward!"

Her hand was still lying upon the wall, and as he finished speaking, he caught it, and pressed it to his lips with a fervour born of passion. Constantia, though a little troubled by this new manner of his was yet glad that the hand was so well cased—that the gloves, for once in her life, were long, and

suggestive of the world of fashion—were perfect as Donna's own—nay, as she remembered quickly, they were the exact counterpart of Donna's.

She did not withdraw her hand from his embrace, and a little tremor ran through her. Never before had he been like this—never before had he been so pronounced in his wooing. It was a thrill of hope and joy mingled, that rushed through her, but with it, and almost overpowered by it, was a curious sense of resentment. She could not explain it to herself, and it deadened her joy, but she knew that she shrank, not so much from him, as from this unknown vehemence; and presently she took her hand out of his grasp, slowly, and very gently.

"I did not deceive. I did not know," she whispered; emotion, rather than settled purpose, now making her voice sink to this low level.

"Is that the truth?" demanded he fiercely. "For all this time that I have searched vainly for you—can you tell me honestly that the avoidance was not of your making? I mistrust you as keenly as I love you. That other woman in yellow! did you put her purposely in my path to mislead and distract me? Time wasted, if so, for I am not one to be thwarted when once my feet are set upon a path." His voice sank a little, and grew soft and tender; the fire, the anger, died from it. "Though you have flouted, scorned me," he said, "yet now that I am with you, I forgive you all."

Constantia could not speak. Was it all real? What tender humility! Who would have believed he could have so abased himself, even at the shrine of all-governing love? She was bewildered; she trembled. Was this quite what she hoped for, even in her wildest dreams? She felt she ought to speak, yet some instinct held her dumb.

"You are silent," cried he, coming closer to her—so close that his very breath lifted the soft hair on her forehead. "You are silent; you do not condemn my presence; you do not censure my persistent determination to find and speak with you at all hazards—even at the chance of rousing your displeasure.

You are *still* silent! Is there no hope to be garnered from that?"

Constantia had moved backwards, away from him, into the shadow of an ivied wall, and from that safe shelter she spoke.

"Why should you be without hope?" she asked faintly.

"'Why should hope be mine?' you should rather say," cried he. "Hitherto you have been so tantalising, so impossible to comprehend. I have poured out my very soul before you, and yet you have turned aside."

He spoke fluently—eagerly. That he should be reproachful filled her with amaze. When had he poured out his soul before her?

"Oh, do not think I turned aside," she said, with a touch of gentle dignity. "But all this is strange—unthought of——"

"By you, perhaps—yet *that* I can hardly believe—but not by me. Has all this past time counted as naught? Was I not at your feet night and day? Pardon me, if at mad moments I fancied——"

He hesitated.

"Yes," she whispered very gently, "you fancied?"

"How kindly you speak now!" he cried impatiently. "Yet how cruel you can be! I fancied foolishly—without reason, if you will—that sometimes those beautiful eyes of yours gave me encouragement. Was that so? Or am I now to be told that love like mine has come too late—that for the sake of mere conventionalism it must be thrust aside—that it is forbidden?"

Constantia made a step forward, and held out her hand to him. He was in grief—in trouble. What did it all mean? How had she hurt him?

"Why should your love be forbidden?" she murmured softly. Was she not ready to accept and treasure it? Her heart beat violently, her voice was almost inaudible, but he heard her. She was hardly prepared for the change that came over him—for the sudden subtle sense of triumph that brightened his eyes and raised his figure to its fullest height.

"Do you know what such words mean," he cried, "from you to me? Not forbidden—*not!* You permit me, then, to love you? There was more than I dared believe in that little message you sent me to-night."

"A message!" repeated Constantia faintly.

"Do not deny it. I will have no evasions from your lips now. That sweet message, see! it lies upon my heart." With a rather theatrical gesture that sat with indescribable absurdity upon his dignified figure, he half drew a crushed note from the folds of his domino. "It has lain here ever since. That one little word about the black cross upon your shoulder, that was to distinguish you from Constantia, that told me all. It gave me hope; it even suggested to me (forgive me, sweet) that you might be jealous of your cousin."

He still held the little scented billet between his fingers, and a wild longing to possess, to read it, seized on Constantia. It would be so simple, so easy; whoever he believed her to be, it was not Constantia, and by putting forth a hand she could gain it. Yet some honest instinct forbade her the act; with a heart bruised, and bleeding, and insulted, she still remembered "*Noblesse oblige.*"

"I sent you no message," she said, controlling herself bravely.

"Are you afraid of me, that you still persist?" exclaimed he eagerly. "Can you not trust me? How you tremble! Have you no faith in my honour? You think, perhaps, that this note will betray you? You do not know me." He did not, however, destroy the note in her presence as another man might have done. "Donna! my beautiful! my beloved one! believe in me."

The girl stood motionless. The blood forsook her face, all her heart died within her. She knew now *surely*, what some instinct had told her before, that her cousin was the author of that note. She knew too, that Featherston, whom she had believed in, as in her faith, was false.

She forgot that she ought to speak, to say some-

thing that should wither him, as he stood there, so guiltily glad, so sinfully triumphant, in the cold, unsensual moonlight. She remained deadly silent, because she had forgotten all, but the treachery present to her.

"You do not speak," cried he vehemently. "Have you no word for me? Donna! Donna! Think what anxiety is mine, whilst I——"

"Oh, sir, go!" interrupted she, realising at this moment through all her sorrow, the wrong done to him in letting him further speak. "Go, I entreat you!"

In her agitation she had spoken aloud, and as her clear, girlish voice, with its musical Irish broadness, reached his ear, so unlike the *trainante* accents he had expected to hear, he fell back a step or two, aghast, and all his self-possession deserted him, and he stared at her blankly—dumb.

His extreme defeat touched Constantia and made her strong. She laid her hand upon the wall near her to steady herself, and slowly withdrew the mask from her face. Her pale, young, pretty face, sad in its pallor, and earnestness, and contempt, looked straight at him, with a beauty he had been a little dead to, in the past.

"A mistake like this," she said, "is not to be remedied. Words would be wasted on it. I regret that it was my misfortune to lead you so far astray, but—I was innocent of intention!" She looked at him with a keen anxiety. "You *must* know that," she said.

She had given him, unconsciously, time to recover. To find himself mistaken in the object of his devotion, to know that ears unmeant had listened to his sentimental ravings, this in itself was enough to unsettle for the instant the reason of any ordinary man; but that it should be Constantia who had been the recipient of his love-confidences, poured forth for another, was a vile aggravation of the horror that such a situation was bound to hold. He writhed beneath it, but during the pause that ensued upon recovery—and the time it took Constantia to form and give voice to her protest—he pulled himself

together in a measure, and now tried to throw a jaunty air into his speech.

"Not so much a mistake, as a good joke," he said, acting the hypocrite, it must be confessed, with but a poor countenance. "What! Did you think I did not know? That I could not see the difference between you and your cousin? Could you not guess? You were always a little wanting in the finer shades of humour, my dear Connie, but yet I believed you would have seen through my absurd protestations of affection for Mrs. Dundas. (Pray do not betray me to her. She would never forgive me!) A being with a soul sprightly as yours should have read through any disguise, through any——"

"Had you been able to read through mine," said Constantia coldly, "this scene would not have been."

"Do you not still catch it?" began he, with a daring assumption of laughing surprise. But she stayed him with a glance.

"Oh, cease this deception!" she said quickly. "It is unworthy of—what I *once* thought you! No! Not another word. If you would do me one last favour—go!"

She spoke with vigour, though in a low voice. He recognised the power of it, and turned abruptly away. The shadows caught and hid him, and with a sigh of passionate relief, she sank once again upon the stone seat of the parapet.

CHAPTER XXIV

SHOWING HOW ONE WORKED OUT A PROBLEM OF THE HEART; AND HOW ANOTHER HEARD, FOR ONCE IN HER LIFE, A WORD OR TWO OF TRUTH CONCERNING HERSELF.

So this was what a masked ball meant? Except that she felt so cold, so numbed, she could have laughed aloud at the ironical flavour of her thought. This ball to which she had looked forward with such eager impatience. Would she ever care to go to a ball again?

She wondered to herself why she did not feel some sorrow, some regret. Why were there no tears in her eyes? She felt, indeed, no inclination to cry. There was nothing, only a burning sense of anger—a contemptuous anger that curled her lip. Truly her instincts had not deceived her about that woman. She was just, however, in her resentment, as few women are. She did not exculpate the hero in the sorry affair, and blacken beyond all recognition the siren who had led him from safe harbours into the maelstrom of a love that could only end in destruction. If she condemned Donna, she scorned him; and there was no place in all her mind that held so much as one of the old kindly feelings he used to inspire.

By degrees her thoughts travelled back to her first entry to-night into this ill-omened house. She remembered how she had seen Donna, and had noted the slight difference between the two dominoes. She remembered, too, with a little bitter pang, how she had appraised Donna in her mind as being generous beyond her fellows, in that she had made her gift in no whit less desirable than the covering she had chosen for herself—the domino, the gloves, the very fan (with which she had been so foolishly pleased) the same.

She unhooked the fan from her waist in a ~~slow~~, methodical way, and, breaking it across her ~~thigh~~ knee, dropped it into the rushing streamlet; it fell with a

faint crashing sound, having struck the stone-work of the parapet, and then disappeared. She drew off her gloves then, and tore them gently and deliberately, and sent them after the fan. She could not, however, so dispose of the domino, nor of her own thoughts. There was no passion in her actions, no vehemence—only a certain longing to get rid of things detested.

Her musings came back upon her presently. She felt, in a degree, easier because of her bare hands, and the knowledge that the fan was no longer touching her; and after a while she recalled her meeting with Stronge.

How was it *he* had not been deceived? She could not mistake his manner, at all events. He had known her, and, besides, she had let him hear her voice. What instinct had forbidden her to speak to—to that other—save in a whisper? She was glad in her soul, however, that she obeyed it, and that so the truth was laid bare to her.

Yes, it was strange that Mr. Stronge had known her; *he* had not recognised her, but the other had. A little glow of gratitude towards him, that, had he but known it, would have raised him into the seventh heaven, awoke within her heart for Andrew Stronge. He had known through her disguise, though she had not known him; he could not be deceived.

Some words—a line—ran through her brain:

Oh! lovers' eyes are sharp to see.

Was he, then, the true lover—had Featherston never loved her at all? His eyes, in truth, had not been “sharp to see”; he had proved himself utterly base and false—false to the heart's core!

She brought her fingers together with a force born of passion, though her body still, for the most part, remained obedient to her will, resting calm, quiescent, rigid, as though carved in marble. Tears, however, rose, and welled slowly to her eyes.

“How was it? Has he gone? Was he making *very* violent love to you? One can imagine it,” cried a gay voice at her elbow—a voice consumed with

laughter. "Did he comport himself properly? Did he do it nicely? I hope for once in his life the starch was out of him."

Constantia started convulsively. She turned slowly round, and saw Donna's eyes gleaming at her mischievously through her mask. She seemed shamelessly unabashed. Constantia, with her own face uncovered, regarded her with a wonder that should have scorched her, had she been possessed of feeling. The girl was almost too angry to speak. The heat of indignation had dried the tears on her cheeks, and she stood erect before her adversary, with her head well up, though every limb was trembling.

"No," she said slowly. "It was to *you*, it seems, that he was making love."

"By proxy! What a sell for him!" said Donna, with a grimace. She broke into open laughter this time. "I would have given a thousand crowns to see his face when he saw yours. Oh, why are the best comedies those that are never seen in public?"

"Your imagination is so vivid that I should think you derive a considerable amount of amusement from these hidden comedies, even at second-hand," said Constantia coldly. Then suddenly her anger broke forth. "How *dare* you speak to me?" she cried, in a tone low but full of passion. "I wonder you are not ashamed to stand there before me, knowing what you know. To you—a married woman—he uttered vows of love, he addressed words that could only be regarded as insulting—to you!"

"My good Connie, recollect yourself," entreated Mrs. Dundas airily. "The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth for me. It was to *you* those flowery vows were proffered, to you those insulting words were said. Oh, fie! Oh, Connie, who would have believed it of you! Oh, well, really now, you know, the line should be drawn somewhere."

"How can you make a jest of it? How try to——"

"But you yourself have confessed he was making love to you, and in anything but a seemly fashion."

"In the letter, not in the spirit, as you well know."

You laugh. You derive amusement from this. Is all shame dead within you? To-day, Varley; to-morrow, Featherston; the next day, who shall decide?"

"I shall, naturally," returned Mrs. Dundas, with unabated gaiety. "Who should have a better right? Surely, my dear girl, you will not deny me a chief voice in a matter of such vital importance?"

"You—a married woman—and with lovers!" continued Constantia, in a choked tone. "So many of them, and your husband ignorant, trustful, loving."

"There is safety in a multitude, my pretty lecturer. If it were only one, now—say Featherston—how much worse it would sound!"

Constantia made a vehement gesture. "Say what you like," she said; "it will be without grace or godliness."

"You are angry," suggested Donna mildly, and apparently with surprise. "*Quelle bêtise!* And with me, who have perhaps done you the best turn you will ever get. Ingratitude dwells with silly girls like you. Have I not, then, opened your eyes?"

"To what?" coldly.

"To the fact that Mr. Stronge, if a trifle depressing, is worth a million of the most fascinating hypocrites alive; and of such last, if I mistake not, is our smooth friend Featherston. As for the trade mark—every one is in trade nowadays. Stick to your wet-blanket man, say I, and in after years cast blessings on the head of your despised cousin."

"It is not necessary to waste so much eloquence," said Constantia, with a contemptuous glance. "Believe me, I shall in future interfere in no wise with your and Mr. Featherston's arrangements."

"Pouf! It is scarcely worth while trying to manage matters for you," said Mrs. Dundas, "you are so remarkably dense. Why, you absurd child, can't you see that if I wanted your precious Featherston I could have had him without the asking; that it was by my will and pleasure he was betrayed into thinking the domino with the Maltese cross mine. He gave me an unwelcome hint once, and such debts I always repay fourfold."

"You wish me to understand you are revengeful," said Constantia. "That is a valuable knowledge! It shows me what to expect from you in the future."

"Let us prorogue Parliament," said Donna lightly. "To speak to you in your present mood would be to own myself as foolish as you. You are bent on vilifying me in your own mind, so that argument would be useless. Yet I persist in saying I am without fault in the affair."

"Does treachery, then, not count? Treachery, not only to your guest, but to one of your own blood; your kinswoman. Was it nothing to clothe me like yourself that I might be pained, humiliated? To press upon me gifts that should help to my undoing? Is your soul so dead within you that you cannot comprehend the *shame* I feel? Have you *no* feeling? No! Stand back from me. Do not touch me." Her Irish blood was now aflame, and her tall, supple young figure, drawn to its fullest height, shook with the intensity of her emotion. "Traitor!" she said between her teeth. "I would not have treated a *dog* as you have treated me."

She raised her right arm with an imperious gesture, as if to forbid Donna's approach, and still holding it uplifted, turned away and walked quickly towards the house.

Donna looked after her.

"She is a little savage now," she said half aloud, "but she will be a superb woman. She can have the world at her feet if she will, but she will spoil her chances, and all her good times, by her absurd morality!"

She, too, left the moonlit parapet and stepped lightly towards the near shrubbery. Again the amused smile curved her lips, her eyes shone gaily; she saw some one who had evidently been waiting for her during her interview with Constantia, and she waved her hand to him. As she drew closer he came to meet her. It was Lord Varley

CHAPTER XXV

SHOWING HOW VARLEY BETRAYED JEALOUSY, AND DONNA
A STRANGE GENEROSITY; AND HOW THE LATTER
DANCED A FANDANGO IN THE MYSTIC MOONLIGHT.

"WELL?" he asked, as she joined him.

"An inappropriate word. 'Ill' would rather describe it. That little country shrew, that impossible cousin of mine, has given me an extremely *mauvais quart d'heure*, simply because I made a laudable effort to put her in the right path to fame and fortune. Had I deliberately plotted *against* her peace of mind, she could not have been more abusive; yet I was all *for* it."

"To know you is to be sure of that. What mischief have you been up to now?" asked Varley lazily.

She cast a swift, amused glance at him.

"Every hour proves it," she said. "You are the one man in the world suited to me. The boldness of your insolence is refreshing in this adulatory age. But of Constantia—you do not understand."

"Probably not; she would be a difficult study at any time, I fancy. Well, what have you done to her?"

"Merely betrayed a tiny secret. A secret so tiny that it was scarcely worth the betrayal; a thing of no real importance, and entirely without depth; but because of it she turned upon me, and was, in all, rather violent. At all events, she gave her unbiassed opinion of my poor self pure and undiluted, an opinion decidedly more forcible than complimentary."

"She requires training," said Varley, with a frown. "She is brusque to a painful degree."

"You mean she tells the truth," said Donna, with a laugh. She was not at all bitter—she was even generous.

"Exactly. I have yet to hear what truth she told you, or why she told it."

"All because I gave her a domino of the most

recherché—one I should not have disdained myself. You have not seen her yet, I think, so that I must enlarge on it to you. Well, Featherston not having the wit to see through yellow satin, mistook her for some one else, and poured out unlimited love at what proved to be a wrong shrine.”

“Considering how Constantia affects him, she could hardly be annoyed by the love.”

“She was, however, when he addressed the supposed object of his affections by her Christian name, which didn’t happen to be Constantia. *That* was awkward ; I heard a little, and I guessed the rest.”

Varley gave way to merriment.

“Poor Featherston !” he said. “Condole with Constantia if you will, but you must confess it was rough on him.”

“Ah, you take his part !” cried Mrs. Dundas. It was her turn now to be amused. “If you knew for whom the love was really meant, you might be, perhaps, a little more chary of your pity.”

Varley dropped her arm, and turned to her with a rather savage expression upon his face. In spite of the careless good-humour that usually characterised him, he could be at times angry to violence. He laid his hands upon her shoulders, and so moved her that the moonbeams fell full upon her uplifted face.

“Well,” said she, with a little curl of her lip, “am I as lovely as you thought me ?”

“So,” he said, “you have been encouraging that sneak, it appears, all this time !”

Mrs. Dundas shook herself free of him, and, stepping back, regarded him earnestly for a moment. Her eyes shone like stars, her rose-red lips grew grave ; and slowly a smile grew upon her face that never was seen there save by him alone. It was a revelation, it was tender, gentle, real ! The whole woman seemed transformed.

“When one loves there is but one *encouraged*,” she whispered softly.

At that instant she was an exquisite creature, refined, idealised, purified by almighty love. Varley, with an impassioned gesture, caught her in his arms

and held her closely to his beating heart. To him this imperfect woman was the one perfect thing on earth; a woman to love "*passionnément, éperdûment, et pour toujours.*"

"How strangely you looked at me just then," she said, with loving reproach; "how oddly you look even now!" She pushed him from her gaily, and casting sentiment to the winds grew once more provoking, tantalising. "What means that frown, my lord?" cried she. "Are you down on your luck, then? Have you backed the wrong horse, or has your true love played you false?"

"I trust not—I believe not," returned he, with emotion. As he spoke he bent his head, and pressed his lips vehemently upon the bare, lovely arm.

They were standing in a very secluded spot (well known to them), one window only in the whole house bearing upon it; this belonged to a small turret chamber seldom in use, and in which now a solitary light was gleaming. On such a night as this, when the house was full of guests, it was quite certain to be untenanted.

"You would not deceive me," he said, with agitation. The words were rather a question than an affirmation.

"You know it," she answered. It was inexpressibly sweet to her to know he loved her; it was sweeter still to feel her power over him.

"But that fellow, Featherston; you must explain that," he went on quickly. "You have known of his—his damned impertinence for some time." His face was very pale, and he had evidently lost control over himself. He did not seek to apologise to her for the objectionable word used, and was, in fact, ignorant of having uttered it. Trifles of this sort, however, did not weigh on Donna; she passed them lightly over as a rule, and, indeed, found a certain pleasure in them. They gave a flavour to the situation, a piquancy that enriched it, by their betrayal of the speaker's feelings.

"I guessed at it, rather. I could hardly know, as he gave me no open demonstration of his meaning

until to-night, when, as I tell you, I overheard in part, and filled in the rest." This was a lie, as Featherston's attentions for some time, *in private*, had been decidedly *prononcé*. But a lie more or less did not count with her. "But I had my suspicions when first he began to make polite inquiries as to when Mr. Dundas would be at home. It occurred to me that he must have been struck by Mr. Dundas's moral qualities, which are unimpeachable, until I discovered that he avoided Ballymore on the hours named. But why waste our time talking of him?" cried she suddenly. "The moments are flying that we can spend together."

"Happy moments have always wings." He placed his hand very tenderly beneath her chin, and turned her face to him. "Have you enjoyed yourself?"

"Does that require an answer? Have I not been with *you*? Thrice blessed yellow dominoes that helped me to my desire to see, to dance, to talk with you as I should not have dared to do under more open circumstances! If anything should be said now, why, it was Constantia with whom you danced, talked, etc. What more natural, considering how old a friend of yours she is, and so determined an ally, too, of Lady Varley's! By-the-bye, speak of a—an angel, there she goes, with her shadow as usual beside her."

An amused laugh that had mischief in it, and something besides that brought the blood to Varley's brow, broke from her. She laid her hand on his, and swiftly, noiselessly, withdrew deeper into the shadow, as Lady Varley, accompanied by O'Grady, moved across a patch of moonlight. Yolande had her mask in her hand, and her face looked sad and colourless. Her eyes seemed larger than usual, dark shadows lying beneath. She walked with her ordinary proud step, but there was weariness written on every line of her figure. She had come to Ballymore to-night entirely against her own wishes, partly in obedience to an expressed desire of her husband's, and partly lest her absence from Mrs.

Dundas's ball might give rise to any speculation amongst the army of gossipers that besiege every small place.

O'Grady was talking to her. His calm, cultured voice came to them across the grass. Presently a rhododendron bush hid them, and they passed from view.

"Her shadow! why do you call him that?" demanded Varley, with a suspicion of hauteur in his tone.

"I was wrong," returned she lightly. "Such godly women never have a 'shadow,' or a 'friend,' they have only an 'agreeable acquaintance.' But, as we have all learned from our infancy, there isn't so very much in a name after all—or else *a great deal!*"

"I have before this suggested to you that it would be as well to keep Lady Varley's name out of the conversation," said he, in a low tone that time had taught her it would be wise to regard. But she despised warnings.

"With all my heart. Keep her out of your mind, forget her as much as you like," she said flippantly. "But—keep your eyes open. The travelled youth is ever full of guile, and between you and Madam there seems to be little love lost. I was astonished at seeing her here to-night; but now I see light."

"Would you leave nothing unsullied?" he said, with a dark glance. "Do not pursue this subject, I—entreat you."

His tone meant, "I command you." Donna, who had said all she intended to say, laughed softly, and slipped her hand, with a tender, seductive glance, through his arm.

"Did you hear that?" she asked, alluding to a clock in the old tower that had struck the quarter to twelve; the sound rang out sorrowfully, solemnly upon the still air. "I'd assassinate that clock, if I dared. How it kills one's joy, breathing dissolution as it strikes! Now, it will separate you from me. Our happy night, that knew but the one regret—that it should some time end—is now almost over. Midnight is at hand, when dominoes and the merry mask must

be flung aside, and we must once again be as we seem, not as we are."

"You have been happy, then?"

"Absurdly so, for many reasons. Hear them: I have been with you, I have done that girl who hates me a really good turn, and I have circumvented Featherston! Threefold bliss!"

"You are a little bitter with regard to Featherston," said he, regarding her with some suspicion.

"You have a glimmer of reason now and then," returned she airily. "Yes! I owed him a tiny debt which I flatter myself I have now quite wiped out, leaving even a little to my own credit. I have but one sorrow, and that is, that I could not see his face when Constantia spoke. It must have been a picture."

There was a satisfaction that was venomous in her tone. To Varley it was music. His doubts cleared.

"He fancied he loved me," went on Mrs. Dundas, with a light sneer. "In reality, any affection he has in him is given to Constantia. I spoiled his chance there."

"He is an excellent *parti*. Why destroy a little game like that?"

"For her sake. He is not good enough for her."

"Quite so, I should say. A girl without a penny, especially a girl of good birth, should be glad to accept such a chance of escape from the slavery of poverty."

"There are other chances far better for her than marriage with Featherston. He is selfish, unreliable, a liar and a hypocrite!"

She spoke warmly, and as one who knew. So far, indeed, as the last two accusations went, she was, beyond doubt, a competent judge.

Varley seemed surprised.

"You are very careful of Constantia," he said; "a girl who, it is notorious, regards you in any but a friendly light."

"I know that. I can hardly explain it to myself," she said, with a slight smile. "I feel that girl

despises—hates me; yet I am so far fascinated by her that I would work her way to happiness. I use her; yes. I abuse her—true! Yet I wish her only good. She is the one honest thing amongst us, I believe, and I would not see her sacrificed to a poor-blooded creature like Featherston if I could prevent it.”

“Perhaps you think it will be for her good to die an old maid.”

“I think it will be to her everlasting advantage if she accepts Andrew Stronge. *There* is a man, who will make her happy, if you will!”

“What! You advocate *his* cause now?”

“He little likes me. Yet, am I so poor a thing that I cannot see virtue in mine enemy? *Pouf!*” cried she gaily, “you are in the dark yet as to my mental powers. I acknowledge his good parts, though he slay me. I know them all, and they are numerous. I *like* to acknowledge them; it makes me, in a sense, his superior. He will grant me no charitable doubt, and so I am the more generous of the two.”

“Why should he dislike you?”

“Who shall say? And it is of no consequence at all. Your high-minded person is always very narrow. However, he loves most honestly that little fool, and I would see her happy, in spite of many insults.”

She laughed gaily as if at the remembrance of the insults, and after a bit Varley joined in.

“You are truly an incomprehensible woman,” he said.

“In that lies my charm. That is why you adore me,” retorted she, with a saucy smile. “Were I easily understood of all men, my power would vanish; I should be like the rest of my kind—flat, stale, and unprofitable; I should bore you in a month. You say to yourself of me, one moment: ‘She is wild, wicked, incorrigible;’ the moment after: ‘Nay, she is good, charitable, generous.’ After that you are hopelessly mixed, and, being a man, and impossible, as you think, to be beaten, you are determined to wait and watch for ever until you solve the mystery;

but that will be *never*. I perplex, puzzle, interest, stimulate, and so—bind you!”

She laughed again triumphantly, and stepping back from him, placed her arms akimbo, and nodded defiantly at him like any queen of burlesque.

“By-the-bye,” she exclaimed suddenly, “did you notice how that bit of antiquity, Lady Daryl, danced her lancers? No? No, *really*? Why, where were your eyes—your sense of humour? As for me, I was enthralled, enchanted. I refused to talk to Mr. Barry, who was rather amusing me at the time, that I might with uninterrupted thought study the performance, and take a lesson gratis. She is eighty, as you know, our Daryl, but she hankers after youth, and fondly believed her disguise would delude the onlookers into the belief that a young and artless thing was tripping it before them. All the steps learned in another age came back to her. She minced, she pranced, she showed considerably more ankle than was proper, and—well, look here, see how she conducted herself, deeming herself secure and unknown behind the folds of the wily domino.”

As she spoke, she picked up her petticoats on either side, with an airy grace and a generous disregard of propriety, and, stepping back from him into the middle of the path, commenced a *pas seul* that was irresistibly comic. She so exactly represented old Lady Daryl, with all the ancient quavering movements, the decayed coquetry, the sweeping, bowing, grimacing airs and graces of a day forgotten, that characterised that faded belle, that Varley fairly roared with laughter.

“Note her frisky ways!” cried she, still springing to and fro with all the exaggerated sprightliness of one vainly striving to be young when handicapped by dreary age. “Mark her youthful grace! Take heed of the tender agility that sits so sweetly on the gay young thing! The very poetry of motion, eh, Varley? I’m sure I’m vastly obleeged to you, my lord, for your polite criticism.” Here she imitated the miserable old fribble’s voice to a nicety. “Stand back, sir, till I give you a better view. Say now, Frederic, wouldn’t

it have been a pity to let you be done out of so good a thing?"

Panting, exhausted, laughing until her sides shook, she stood before him and grasped his arm.

"So late, so late!" she gasped. "Let us run for it. Midnight is on the very stroke, and I am bound as hostess to see the death of the immoral domino, and the birth of the decorous dance."

As they drew nearer the windows, she stopped him. "You go that way," she said, "I shall go this. And remember, *should* the question arise, that you have been very attentive to Constantia to-night. Dance with her now to give the idea a colour."

CHAPTER XXVI.

SHOWING HOW DONNA PARRIED AN ATTACK.

SHE was gone from him in a moment. She ran lightly through a side door, and when, a few minutes later, at the signal from old Lord Muskerry—who had been requested to fling a slipper into the air as midnight struck, as a warning to all Cinderellas to throw aside their disguises and proclaim themselves as they really were—all there divested themselves of dominoes and masks and stood revealed to their partners, and their partners to them, Mrs. Dundas was discovered at the end of the room laughing gaily with old Lord Killeens of Blue Ribbon fame, who was the kindest, the prosiest, and certainly the most harmless man in the United Kingdom.

Her purpose once accomplished, she did not lose much time over the prosy earl. She shunted him on to a dowager of noble dimensions, and catching up her now useless domino, moved towards the door, ostensibly for the purpose of getting rid of it—she who

could have had a little army to do her will had she so chosen!

As she passed rapidly through the empty hall, she saw Lady Varley standing there with a heavy crimson plush cloak around her. O'Grady was standing near her, but she was not talking to him; she was staring at the open doorway, gazing out into the darkness beyond with an impatience she had almost ceased to subdue.

"What, Lady Varley! going so soon?" said Mrs. Dundas, going slowly up to her.

"I must ask you to excuse me," said Lady Varley in a low, careful tone. She did not look at her hostess as she spoke, but employed herself fastening the already fastened catches of her cloak. "My abrupt departure may seem to you ungracious, but—there are many reasons why I must leave your—pleasant dance so soon."

The manner in which she plainly forced herself to be civil made her words almost an insult. Mrs. Dundas regarded her with the warmest sympathy.

"Ah! you are tired, fatigued," she said sweetly. "One can see it. That will do for a first reason, at all events. As for the others——" She paused. She turned her eyes upon O'Grady, and her lips widened into one of her most brilliant smiles. "Mr. O'Grady—is he going—with you?" The little hesitation was perfect. "Am I to be so unfortunate as to lose you both in one moment?"

Lady Varley made her no reply; she only moved a step or two nearer to the door, and stood there as though she had forgotten her. But O'Grady's glance met Donna's, and dwelt on it. He had peculiar eyes, earnest, searching—eyes that compelled your regard.

"Ah, Mrs. Dundas," he said pleasantly, "do not tell me that you wish to get rid of me thus early. I had hoped, when I had seen Lady Varley to her carriage, that you would have given me that dance you denied me in the earlier hours."

For a second Donna was disconcerted. He had known her, then, through her disguise! But after all it might as well have been Constantia. She had not

spoken, she remembered, and how could he be sure if she persisted in saying it must have been her cousin he had asked for that waltz? By-the-bye, it would be wise to allude to it as a polka; it would be a proof that she had not been the one.

She was startled out of her pretty plans (which all had rushed through her fertile brain in the short time it had taken her to pretend to disentangle her fan from her lace flounces) by seeing Constantia coming swiftly down the hall. The girl looked pale and disturbed, and passed her as though she was not there.

"Are you going home, Lady Varley? Will you take me with you?" she asked, in a voice that was almost a whisper.

"Certainly, dear, if you wish it. But so soon, Connie! and the dance only just commencing, as it were."

"Oh, do take me," said Constantia, with an entreaty that was vehement.

They had both spoken very low, but the hall was quite empty, and therefore every word could be distinctly heard.

"Are you too deserting me, Connie?" said Mrs. Dundas amiably. "This dance has been a failure indeed. All my friends are forsaking me together."

At the word "friends," Constantia lifted her head and fastened her large eyes upon her. They were filled with a passionate contempt. Then she turned away and moved closer to Lady Varley, who was still gazing with an intense eagerness into the night beyond.

"Will it *never* come?" she said to Constantia. The words seemed to escape her involuntarily, and betrayed her loss of composure. Even as she spoke, the crunching of wheels upon the gravel outside was heard.

"Now, Lady Varley," said O'Grady, coming forward and offering her his arm. Mrs. Dundas also went up to her. She was not to be ignored by any one in her own house—and as yet the game was in her own hands.

"Good night," she said cordially, "I hope a

good night's rest will make you all right in a few hours."

"Good night," said Lady Varley; "thank you." Her tone was cold, but courteous; she laid her hand gently in Donna's. But Constantia could not do this. She swept past her cousin as though she was invisible, and settled herself in the very farthest recesses of the brougham, so that it might be plainly seen by everybody that she was not going to offer even the barest civilities. She was young, of course, and had many things to learn.

Mrs. Dundas turned back into the hall with O'Grady, and for once in her life did, without deliberation, a foolish thing. She renewed the discussion of a moment since.

"You accuse me of denying you a dance," she said, with a coquettish smile, lifting her eyes boldly to his. "A polka was it you said?"

"I don't think I said anything," replied he, with an amused gaze that should have warned her.

"No? My mistake, then. But yours is still to be explained. It was probably my cousin, Miss MacGillicuddy, to whom you spoke."

"Pardon me, no. You are both the same height; you are both"—with a slight bow—"beautiful; your costumes were identical, but my eyesight is still very good."

"Don't depend altogether upon it," said she lightly. "All that sand in the East may have done its work without your knowledge. Take my word for it, it was Constantia who rejected you." She glanced at him archly. "I do not think I should have had the heart to do it." Her eyes, as a rule, were irresistible when she chose; but O'Grady, though still perfectly friendly, was not to be subdued by them.

"Your word is no doubt as good as your bond," said he, smiling; "but I assure you it was not your double who threw me over for—Lord Varley!" He laughed a little as he noticed how she started. "You see I am a hopeless person; when not all the sand of all the desert could blind me, you can readily

believe that it would not be easy to throw dust in my eyes—with a successful result.”

“You have a meaning in what you say, of course,” said she, leaning back indolently against a pillar, and gazing at him through lids insolently lowered. “Let me hear it.”

“I desire Lady Varley’s happiness,” he said boldly.

“Beyond doubt; one can see that.” A faint sneer curved her lips. “Do you intend to be the creator of it—is that your rôle?”

O’Grady controlled himself admirably.

“Varley’s faith means her honour,” he said, ignoring her vile insinuation. “You are, as all the world knows, very charming, very fascinating. Many men will bow at your shrine; all I demand is that you let that one man go.”

“And who are you that you should demand?” asked she, in a low tone that now he felt was dangerous.

“Pardon me; I put it badly. I entreat, then.”

“It is a great compliment, doubtless,” she said, with a curious laugh. “Is she so poor a creature that she must beg her husband out of my hands? And you—what is it you are doing in this *imbroglio*? Should Lord Varley and I never meet again, she would presumably be happy; should things continue as they are——”

“She will be unhappy,” said he slowly.

“*Tant mieux pour vous!*” whispered she, casting a side glance at him from under her long lashes. He did not lose his temper, however. “Of what use?” he thought. “She is a soulless thing; she would drag down the very saints to her own level if she could!”

He made her a cold salutation.

“I regret, for your own sake,” he said, “that it is out of your power to comprehend her.”

He turned leisurely away, and, pushing aside a curtain, made his way once more to the ball-room. Mrs. Dundas, thus deserted, watched his retreating figure until the curtain dropped between her and it, and then she slowly let the back of one hand

fall into the palm of the other. It was a thoughtful gesture, and there was a strange gleam in her eyes as they were still turned to the spot where he had disappeared. After a little the intense expression vanished from her face, and she threw up her head with a disdainful air, and a smile warmed her lips.

"This place grows too hot for me," she said to herself, with a quick sense of amusement; "I expect I shall have to make tracks before long. I have offended Featherston hopelessly to-night, and this man—this man, to whom I have done no ill—will work me harm." She frowned, and pressed her fingers tightly together. "There is, too, Andrew Stronge, who knows rather too much of those old Italian days! Oh to be back in that sunny South with——" She hesitated, even in her thoughts, and made a substitution—"without my legal lord." She sighed heavily; then all at once her mood changed. She threw off her depression as swiftly as she had donned it, and the old gay, *insouciant*, reckless air took its place. "After all," she said, "the present is my own, and, whatever happens, it is a thrice blessed thing to know that nothing can possibly interfere with my settlements."

She turned sharply aside, feeling unwilling to show herself in the ball-room for yet another minute or two; and opening the door of the library, she pushed aside a heavy *portière* and entered quickly.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SHOWING HOW—THOUGH THE COMMON BELIEF BE THAT
SHE BE DEAD—DELILAH STILL LIVETH.

A DIM lamp, shaded and turned down, was burning on the centre table; in an arm-chair, leaning back as if a little tired, sat Mr. Dundas. She was a very clever woman, and—without the detestable adjuncts attributed to that class—was also strong-minded. She suppressed her first vehement start of surprise and disgust, and advanced towards him with a radiant smile.

"You, Jo!" she cried, with quite a rapturous intonation.

"Why, yes," said he. He rose and came towards her. All at once he seemed a new man. Love illumined his face, and took away the fatigue from it. "I confess to you I felt some weariness. I am not so young a man as I was, my Donna. The fact is," sadly, "I am too old for you."

"Not you!" said she. She lifted one dainty bejewelled hand, and patted his cheek with a fond touch. He caught the treacherous hand and pressed his lips to it—poor fool!

"Well, at all events, I was tired," he went on, but now he did not look tired at all, but only full of happiness. "I came here to get a moment's rest. And you——" he looked at her quickly, hopefully, "you missed me?" he said. "You came to look for me?" There was intense delight in his tone.

"Do you think you could be absent without my missing you?" asked she reproachfully. "Yes, you have guessed it. That is why I came." She said it quite readily, without a moment's hesitation. Time to think had been denied her, yet she was prepared, and had made the one answer that was most sure to charm, and hold, and blind him. She could have laughed aloud as she spoke, but she restrained

herself, and looked into his eyes with a vision clear, and soft, and tender, that seemed to him the perfection of all things womanly. She was false as Judas. Yet to him she appeared as a very angel of love and goodness.

"Sweetheart," said he, "I am sorry if I caused you even a second's uneasiness. But as I tell you, I felt tired. And now that I look at you, my dearest, how pale you are—how sad—how lovely!"

The last assertion, at least, was true. She was dressed in pure white; she always wore white, as a rule, so that there was nothing extraordinary in that, but to-night her gown was a very marvel of beauty. It was a dream, an inspiration of the immaculate Worth's, and was singularly attractive. It suited her *à merveille*, and added another charm to her wondrous beauty. Pale drooping blossoms of jonquils, a bare degree less white than the robe, lay hidden amongst its folds; a bud or two nestled in her bosom. Around her neck she wore a string of pearls. Above all these her large eyes shone, bright as sapphires; her red hair rested like a crown upon them all.

"Pouf! You are always paying me compliments," she cried gaily. There was nothing in her manner to suggest the idea that such compliments were but as a wearying of the flesh to her. "As to my pallor, it is not possible to get through an affair of this kind without some slight anxiety."

"That is true," said Dundas. He spoke with a certain eagerness. "And as for these foreign affairs, these masked dances, I do not think I should care for them. They give rise to little complications that are scarcely to be desired."

Donna looked at him. How much did he know? Had any one been poisoning his mind? She knew him sufficiently well to be certain that if he was ever uneasy about her reputation, he would speak. She guessed, too, that if he so much as suspected her, he would in all probability kill her. Why should he not? She was his all. There was nothing after—there would be nothing left to regret.

"You are vexed about something," she said very tenderly, feeling it wise to get at the root of the matter.

"It was a trifle rash, perhaps, your giving your cousin a domino the same as your own," said Mr. Dundas. "I don't believe I have ever been so disappointed in any one as I have been in her."

"Poor Connie!" said Mrs. Dundas, with a soft laugh that sounded kindly apologetic for her cousin. "What has she been doing now?"

"She's young," said Mr. Dundas, "and—er—no doubt thoughtless, and I should not have troubled my head about the matter at all, had not you, in your good-nature, given her a gown the facsimile of your own. You know, my dear girl, how censorious people's tongues can be, and how ready they have always proved themselves to say unpleasant things of a woman so beautiful as you."

"I know." She nodded her head carelessly. "But of Connie, how is all this *à propos*?"

"Well, I saw a few things to-night by the merest chance that rather disturbed me—for *your* sake alone. Sir George had been making inquiries about that new telescope of mine, and I had offered to show it to him. You know he is mad on such matters. I went up to the turret chamber where I keep it, and by chance looked through the window on the moonlit scene below. I was fascinated by it. It was charming beyond my belief. As I gazed, I saw your cousin come through the shrubbery with some man—who, I could not distinguish"—Donna here drew a little quick breath of relief—"but Constantia was unmistakable, because you had told me her domino was to be the counterpart of your own."

"Well," said she impatiently, "why do you stop? Go on. What has my giddy cousin done now?"

"I think there are limits to even the most innocent gaiety," said Mr. Dundas severely. "Constantia hitherto has always appeared to me to be a girl with discretion, therefore I was the more surprised to see her let that man kiss her in the open moonlight, as though there were no such thing

as maiden modesty. You must acknowledge it was a rather *risqué* thing to do with all the world astir."

He appealed to her, so she was obliged to answer.

"Would it make it more decent were the world not astir?" she asked, with a flippancy that might have annoyed him had his idol not been perfect and without flaw in his eyes. "And as to kissing in 'open moonlight,' how is it to be managed otherwise? One can't bottle the precious beams and bring them out in private, can one? I think Constantia is to be applauded, and regarded as a rather model young woman in that she does her love-making thus publicly. There! Now I have teased him. Isn't it?" She leaned back her graceful head against his shoulder, and turned her exquisite eyes upwards to his. She was so tall that, as she did this, her lips were almost on a level with his, and with a slow, sweet swaying of her body, she sought and obtained a caress. "Forgive me!" she whispered.

"For your sweet defence of your cousin? My darling, who is there in the world like you? So true, so good, so charitable! I would not, indeed, have thought much of Constantia's suffering herself to be embraced thus lightly, had not her whole air and manner suggested coquetry of a sort too pronounced to be forgiven. I was shocked, and was about to withdraw, when I saw her give way to an act of frivolity that utterly disgusted me."

"I must speak to her. She is very young, and she has no mother," said Donna pathetically. "Go on, dear; let me hear in what further way she angered you."

"She picked up her petticoats," said Mr. Dundas, not without a blush of shame. "Picked them up quite beyond the bounds of decency, my dear girl, and began to dance before this man, whoever he was. She was plainly imitating somebody, because it was not the movements of a young girl, but rather those of an advanced age that she portrayed. I was never so surprised in my life. Constantia has

always seemed to me to be so specially sensible for a girl."

Mrs. Dundas, after a faint struggle with herself, burst out laughing.

"And so when she 'picked up her petticoats beyond the bounds of decency,' you still stayed and watched," she cried. "Oh, you naughty boy! Oh, Jo!" She stood back and shook her finger at him reprovingly. "That it should come to this between us two!" she went on. "That I should have to lecture you! Oh, you terrible man! I, who used to be the wild one, have now to bring you to task! But seriously, then, about our poor Con. Don't be hard upon her, Jo! Don't now, I entreat you! I shall speak to her, in private, you know, just by our own two selves. But you must promise to say nothing at all, and, more than that, you must give me your word you will not, by look or sign, let her see you are displeased with her. Poor dear Con! It would make her thoroughly wretched if she thought she had fallen in your estimation. You are one of her chief gods, you know." She smiled admiringly at him. "You cannot expect me to be surprised at *that*," she said.

He drew her to him and kissed her.

"There is no man on earth as happy as I am," he said.

"And you will give me your word not to be cold to my poor Con?"

"I will give you my word for that and anything else you like."

"And you will trust me to speak to her, and show her where her fault (an innocent one, I swear) lies."

"Where is it that I would not trust you?" said he proudly, fondly.

She was conscious of a sense of relief. Her plans were not yet formed, and it was essential that she should stand well with him until the last. "I have your word, then," she said. She nestled closer to him, and drew one of his willing arms around her neck. "It is so dear to me that you should thus

trust me," she whispered. "To tell you a secret, I was a little uneasy about those two dominoes (Connie's and mine) being so exactly the same, and when I found how she—poor darling foolish girl—was behaving in so silly a fashion with—but," playfully, "that would be betraying a girlish confidence, so you must not ask me about it just yet. But I could not help saying to myself once or twice to-night, when I was busy trying to make my guests happy—and a difficult task it was," plaintively—"how would it be if you were to mistake me for Connie, and—and——" Her voice quite faltered, her lowered eyes surely were suffused with tears.

"My darling—my beloved! How could I mistake you?" cried he with quick emotion. His broad chest heaved, he put out his arms and drew her to him unresisting. It only just struck her at the moment what a powerful man he was, though no longer young, and what a simple thing it would be to him to press the life out of her! "If all the world were in league to hide you from me, I should find you. I should know you anywhere."

"Ah, well! *you* only," she said, rubbing her cheek softly in a kittenish fashion against his arm. "There are others, however, who might have imagined that frivolous Con was me, because of the similarity in our gowns; but you, *never*. That I believe. But there are always the others to be considered wherever one is."

"That is true. No one could, of course, know you as I do," replied he, with a satisfied and trustful smile. "That would be impossible."

His tone was so tenderly boastful that it touched a sense of amusement in Donna's breast. It was all so perfect, so flawless, such a pure bit of comedy! She appreciated it so thoroughly that she could not repress the smile that rose involuntarily and curved her lips. His proud belief in her, his fond trust, evoked only a mirth, suppressed but intense. It did not touch her in any honest way, it only suggested itself as an exquisite joke that it seemed a pity she should enjoy alone. But she consoled herself with

the reflection that she could retail it at her leisure, and she assured herself that she would forget none of the emphatic utterances, not one of the tender glances.

"Ah, yes! you indeed know me," she said, lifting a cool, soft little hand to push back, with a tender touch, the gray hair from his brow.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SHOWING HOW CONSTANTIA CAST OFF HER COUSIN, AND
FOUND HERSELF ON THE VERGE OF A GREAT GRIEF.

MEANWHILE Constantia had gone home with Lady Varley. At first the girl's mind was so distraught with recollections of Donna's treachery, and Featherston's falseness, that she could hardly think of anything else, and had not even wondered at the fact of Lady Varley's abrupt departure. But after a while she became sensible of the extreme quiet of her companion, whose face she could not see in the brougham. She put out her hand at last and touched hers, to find that it was icy cold, and that the fingers were clenched. Her touch woke Yolande from her fit of dumb misery, and with a sharp sigh she roused herself.

"How slow Hunt is driving!" she cried feverishly. "Shall we ever be at home? Speak to him, Constantia."

Constantia did as she was desired, and then, a little unnerved by Lady Varley's manner, waited in silence for what she next might say. But she said nothing. She sought and found the girl's hand again and pressed it with a convulsive earnestness, but no words escaped her.

"You are unhappy — uneasy," returned Constantia at last.

"Uneasy! What a word!" returned she, with terrible though repressed agitation. "My child, my darling, how could I have left her, even for a moment! And all this horrible night, it has seemed like a nightmare. Yes, I have been justly punished. But I did not leave her willingly, Connie, you will believe that. It was forced upon me. I could hardly have refused to enter that woman's house, and yet—— Oh, forgive me, dear! I forgot she was your cousin."

"She is no cousin of mine," cried Constantia vehemently. "I disown her. She is nothing to me. Nothing!"

"Yes, yes? Is it so between you? Yet I should not have spoken. Has she been cruel to you, Connie — to a girl like you? What! Is this only Hillside? Why, we should be at Araglin by this time. Oh, what hours can lie in thirty minutes! Connie! Connie! If anything should have happened."

An awful fear had seized hold on her. She was trembling violently. She half rose in the carriage as though it was impossible to her, in her state of impatience, to sit any longer still, but Constantia placed her arms round her, and drew her back very gently into her seat. It was a shock to her to see Lady Varley, who was always so studiously cold and calm, thus given over to despair, and half wild with nervous dread.

"Why should you give way like this?" she said. "Why should you let a fear so vague disturb you? Baby was as—as well as usual when you left her. What could occur in three hours? And, besides, would they not have sent you word?"

She sought eagerly to soothe her, and by degrees Lady Varley grew comparatively calm. The arrival at the hall-door, however, tended more to calm her nerves than even Constantia's tender endeavours. She sprang from the carriage, and hurried past the servants and up to the nursery, with only a sign to Constantia to follow her. She had apparently forgotten to drop the girl at The Cottage, and Constantia

had been too alarmed about her to mention it. Besides, would it not be selfish to leave her in her present mood? Connie was sufficiently read in human nature to understand that there was something beneath her anxiety for her child, something inferior to that sacred care, but yet strong enough to disturb and harass her.

After all, there was nothing in the nursery to cause fresh grief. The baby was no worse. It could hardly be that, poor little thing, unless it lay within its shroud; and then, no doubt, it would be better! It lay, apparently asleep, in the calm stupor that had composed its life during the greater part of the past week. That it was slowly dying, that days, nay, hours alone divided it from the moment when its soul should quit the earth, was plain—to every one save the mother, who would not, who *dared* not believe it. She hung over it now with such a passion of love and longing on her face as made Constantia's heart contract with fear. She dropped into a chair in the background, and clasped her hands.

Her own grievance was forgotten in this supreme grief. Here was Lady Varley's all—a little morsel, hardly worth the counting in the great roll-call of humanity, yet to her of more value than the whole world itself. Tears welled to Constantia's eyes as she lay back listlessly in her chair, whilst her friend talked eagerly in soft murmurs to the nurse.

How sad it all was for her—her child dying, her husband faithless! Constantia clenched her hands, as she thought of Donna's gay, triumphant laugh—as she pictured her making a light jest out of the knowledge of Varley's submission to her power, his treachery to his wife. Could such things be, and the world still go on in all its round of careless mirth, its swift pleasure that scarce gave time for thought or justice? Surely the day of reckoning would come! But in the meantime must Yolande suffer—must she sink beneath her troubles, with no hand held out to help her?

She looked at Lady Varley's clear-cut features, calm again, now that the momentary suspense was at an end, and told herself that perhaps she wronged

her. She was too pure, too proud a woman to sink beneath dishonour undeserved. There were those who were dragged down beneath the wave of affliction, but there were also those who rose out of it with senses dulled indeed, and wounds all gaping, but with faces serene and passionless, though the cruel rocks had cut sore. These give no sign of the agony within. These have their reward. The stormy petrel skimming the tempestuous wave knows such wild throes of passion fierce and strong as is unknown to the gentler bird who cowers amidst the fragrant inland branches, to hide it from the coming storm.

In Lady Varley there was the divine strength of womanhood, that knows all, endures all, and still is strong.

She turned suddenly to Constantia, and met the girl's eyes bent wistfully upon her. There was genuine love in them, *that* she saw, and a sorrow that she would not see.

"You are tired," she said. "Come with me. You must go to sleep at once."

"Are you going to stay here?" asked Constantia quickly.

"Yes; I generally stay here every night. I do not sit up—you must not think that," with a wan smile, "but it eases my heart," laying her hand lightly on her bosom, "to be near her; and so I have had that couch over there," pointing to a distant corner, "prepared for me. I do not martyr myself, you see," with another sad attempt at a smile; "I can sleep if I choose, but I like to be near her." A heavy sigh escaped her as she finished. Constantia could see that her heart was broken—that in her secret soul, hard as she battled against it, she had lost all hope in her little one's recovery.

"Let me stay with you," entreated she miserably. "Do not send me away. This arm-chair is very comfortable, and—— *Do* let me stay with you."

"As you will, dearest," said Lady Varley gently. She said something in a low voice to one of the women, and presently wine and sandwiches were brought, which she pressed on Constantia. She

touched nothing herself, and after that took no notice at all of her guest. Between her hours of sleep and waking, the girl saw that Lady Varley had spent her night upon her knees beside the tiny cot, praying for what a gracious Lord had seen fit to deny her.

The morning dawned and deepened, and still the child lived. Apparently, it was no worse, no better; but *was* it no worse? Towards noon, Constantia, with whom Lady Varley would not consent to part, entreated and prevailed with her to take a walk for half-an-hour in the garden as she could not sleep.

"Well, yes; if you think it wise. All this anxiety is perhaps foolish," said Lady Varley. "And of course it is necessary to keep up one's strength; when she is on the mend it would be very awkward if I were laid up and not able to look after her."

It was terrible to Constantia to see how she clung to a belief in the child's recovery, the child who was already half-way on its journey to heaven; but she persuaded her to go into the garden with a silent caress, and a hopeful word or two, all the same.

Lady Varley went down the staircase with a languid step, and out into the sweet summer air. It was midday, and the sun was high in the heavens, and the perfume from the open flowers filled the passing breeze. All was cloudless blue above her head, all was green beneath her feet. The day was indeed a golden one, so rich in sweets that one felt overpowered by it, and thought only of some shady nook where one might sit beneath a branching elm and dream the hour away. A tremulous haze lay over the distant sea, and the rocks shone out white as burnished silver.

All round her grew the flowers. Glowing carnations swayed to and fro with the velvet wind, and

Red roses opened passionate hearts
To wooings of the sky.

It was indeed "the time of roses," and crimson cream, and white, they bloomed at every turn. As

they nodded their sleepy heads, a delicate odour escaped from them that was wafted hither and thither until the very wind grew languid with it, and in the centres of their warm bosoms yellow-winged bees hummed drowsily.

As Yolande turned aside to reach the ivied gate that led to the cool shade of the orchard, she met her husband sauntering slowly in her direction.

CHAPTER XXIX.

SHOWING HOW LORD VARLEY CLAIMED CONSIDERATION FOR
HIS—FRIEND!

HE halted somewhat abruptly and then came on ; but it was evident to her that his first impulse had been to avoid her if possible. She gave no sign of having noticed this ; and, indeed, the relations between them of late had been so strained that it scarcely troubled her.

"I had no idea I should see you here," he said, less awkwardly than he thought. "I fancied you in the nursery ; at least, your women told me you were there. How is she ?" He alluded to his child.

"Just the same way, I think." Her eyes were on the ground, and her tone was carefully composed. It was impossible, therefore, for him to know the anguish that was consuming her.

"I dare say it will be nothing," he said cheerfully. He had not seen the child for a week, and so knew nothing about it. His careless tone grated on her. His *own* child ! Was he dead to all things—save one ? She controlled herself, however, and stood waiting to hear what he should say. "I often told you that doctors were false prophets," he said ; "you should not give ear to their croakings—you should not fret as you do."

"True," she said; "it is a foolish thing to fret over any matter, small or great."

There was meaning in her tone, and Varley winced a little.

"You left very early last night," he said presently. He was regarding her intently, and she felt it.

"Yes; I was tired," she said.

"For one so uniformly truthful — one who so prides herself upon her yea being a yea—that is scarcely honest, is it?" asked he, laughing, yet with an only partially concealed sneer. "Say, rather, you did not care for your company."

"It was very excellent company, as it appeared to me. Almost every one we knew or liked was there."

"That surprised you, perhaps; but, as I have often told you, Mrs. Dundas, in spite of certain rumours that may have reached you, is not so altogether objectionable as you believe."

She lifted her head now, and looked full at him. Her dark eyes flashed.

"Who told you I thought her objectionable?" she asked. "Did it occur to you that there might be reason for my so thinking of her? I certainly never said so."

"Your manner towards her is barely civil, however. She is an old friend of mine, and, of course, I am bound to be friendly. As my——"

"Why should you apologise for your — friendship?" interrupted she, with a curious smile. "Pray do not; surely there is no necessity—to your wife!"

"As my wife, I was going to say," he went on quickly, and with a darkened brow, "I had hoped you would have shown her at least courtesy; but to leave her house as you did last night was to give her up to the cruel insinuations of our world. There was a want of refinement in it, a lack of delicacy that I should not have looked for in you."

"You are very good," said Yolande, with a curl of her lip. "You credit me with fine feelings in one breath, and destroy your credit in the next. But a

truce to this pretence," she cried suddenly, lifting to him a face pale and stern. "I do not like your—*friend*, and let that admission explain all."

"But why?" demanded he angrily.

"Let that rest."

"I will not. What fault do you find in her?"

"You are a warm partisan," said she, in a low, dangerous tone. "Is it wise, then, to insist?"

"I think so. As you have yourself suggested, it will be well to put an end to all fencing in this matter. In censuring her it has seemed to me, of late, that you censure me."

"You have courage," she said.

"Why not? What is it, I again ask, that you find fault with in her?"

She threw up her head as if about to speak; her face grew deadly white, her lips parted. Whatever she knew she was about then to disclose; but something checked her. She withdrew her eyes, and by a supreme effort beat down the emotion that was trying to conquer her. Presently she was calm again, and only the tight clasp of her hands betrayed any feeling whatsoever.

"I think her vulgar," she said slowly, contemptuously.

Varley was surprised, and too relieved to be annoyed. He had failed to read between the lines, and did not guess at the sleeping volcano that lay within her breast. He suspected her of knowing, or guessing more than it was expedient she should know; but her answer had convinced him that whatever were her suspicions, her knowledge was sufficiently imperfect to prevent her accusing him openly.

"Oh, if that is all," he said lightly, "it was a pity you did not remain for the rest of the evening. It was about the best dance we have had here for many a day. I quite enjoyed it."

To this she made no answer. A straggling spray of a blackberry bush near had caught her gown, and she now made herself busy unfastening it.

"As you justly remarked, all our best friends were there," he went on, with an assumption of gaiety that

sat, however, rather uneasily upon him. "O'Grady, amongst others. By-the-bye," he said lightly, turning to her with a lively smile, "you must confess that the time you did spend there, short as it was, was not altogether dull. You and O'Grady, I could see,"—here he laughed indulgently—"enjoyed it—together."

Lady Varley started as if he had struck her, and raised her eyes slowly to his. She was paler than before, if possible, with a scorn unspeakable. Was this sidelong accusation meant as a condonement of his own offence? Was it a vile effort to kill the sense of shame within him by an attempt to drag her down to his lower level—to sully *her*, the tall, pale, pure creature who stood before him—to cast filth upon his wife?

With a sharp movement she put her hand to her throat. Her nostrils dilated.

"Take care!" she said in a low tone. "Neglect, insult me, as you will, but do not *dare* seek to lower me to the standard of the woman for whom you have betrayed me!"

She had withdrawn from him a step or two, and now stood regarding him with large, contemptuous eyes. Every line of her figure breathed of vehement indignation. Her tall, slender form, girlish still in its outlines, was uplifted to its fullest height, and was fulfilled with the indignant passion that had at last driven her to speech.

An uneasy laugh broke from Varley. "Now I guessed," he said, "that underneath your assumed indifference some such lie as this was working. I don't know who put it into your head, but I suppose that little devil Constantia. You have magnified a very ordinary friendship into an *affaire de cœur*. Women who insist on living an anchorite life like yours, are bound to find some safety-valve for their fancies. It is a pity you should have chosen this one. It is a pity, too, that you take things so terribly *au grand sérieux*." Here he smiled with an attempt at carelessness, though in reality he was somewhat quelled by the suddenness of her accusation. "If you

were a little less intense, you would be easier to——” He hesitated.

“Live with?” she suggested coldly. She paused, always with her eyes fixed immovably on his. They alone spoke, they seemed to burn into him; but otherwise she was calm, although her heart was on fire, and her soul riven. “There is always a remedy,” she said at last, in a tone so low as to sound like a distant bell, yet so clear as to smite heavily upon his ear.

Just yet he was undecided as to whether he would or would not desire a separation, and so he revolted from her suggestion. Donna’s hold over him, strong as it was, had not quite led him to despise the world’s opinion.

“You must be mad to talk to me like this on so trivial a cause,” he was beginning, but she interrupted him.

“Heroics are out of place here,” she said. “I know your real desire, and a word will do. Believe me, I would gladly cast my life adrift from yours.”

“To join it to——”

CHAPTER XXX.

SHOWING HOW DEATH TOOK TO HIS BOSOM A LITTLE FADING FLOWER.

THE coarse insult was not completed, he had barely time to notice how she blanched and shrank from him in her hurt purity, when the sound of a woman’s hurrying feet along the gravelled path caught her ear. All minor passions died then, her heart flew back to her child. She confronted the nurse (who now appeared, breathless, pale, and terrified), and cried aloud to her in her terror, with white lips, and hands tightly pressed against her bosom.

"What is it? What?" she gasped.

"The baby, my lady. She is not so well. The doctor is with her. He——"

"She is not dead!" said Lady Varley in a low, awful tone. She looked at the woman as though she would tear the answer from her. "Speak, woman, speak!"

"Oh no, my lady—God forbid. But the doctor——"

Lady Varley did not hear her; she had rushed past her, putting Varley, who was in her path, to one side by a quick gesture, as though he had been a branch, or some other inanimate obstruction. She ran through the ivied gate and into the brilliant sunshine of the garden once more, seeing nothing, heeding nothing, feeling numbed, blind, senseless. The lovely, glowing life around her seemed to mock at her misery. The flowers that bloomed into a fresh existence every moment, what could they give to her of hope, since her own sweet blossom was fading, dying! Yet, though she hurried past them with white lips and strained eyes that seemed dead to their beauties, and though she herself was unconscious that she saw them, the glory of that summer noon dwelt with her, and cast a shadow over her during all the long years of her after life.

She reached the nursery at last. What a year it was to her since that terrible moment when she had seen the anxious face of the woman! The doctor was there, bending over the little snowy cot, and Constantia came hurriedly forward as she entered. But she pushed her aside, and went up to the bed. She did not see even the doctor then, she saw only the tiny occupant—she saw what was her life, her heart, her all! There seemed little change, but to the mother it was awful. She had fought passionately against the truth, but now it came home to her. Her darling was indeed going from her. She looked. She fell upon her knees. Some broken words came from her miserable lips: "Blessed Lord, have pity! Thy mercy—it is great—it is everlasting! But—*where is it?*"

She fell forward on the bed; she had given up

to despair. Constantia tried to raise her, but she repulsed her gently, and the doctor, who was a kindly man, and who understood, took her aside, and sent her into the boudoir to rest—and wait. He himself went into an adjoining chamber, that the poor mother might feel herself alone with her dying child.

How the day went, no one knew; but the hours followed each other, and at last darkness fell upon the earth. Some one lighted the lamps, moving with cautious step and slow; but no one spoke to Lady Varley, who crouched beside the bed with her eyes devouring her little one, as though she believed it *could* not be taken from her, so long as she thus held it in her sight. Now and then the doctor crept in and looked at the child; but nothing could be done for it. A gentle sleep had caught it, the end of which would be death.

And at midnight all was over! Lady Varley, upon whose arm the little head was lying, made an inarticulate cry, and threw out her unoccupied arm towards the doctor in a mute agony that unnerved him, strong as he was. He caught her hand and held it firmly.

"Let us thank God," he said, "that there was no pain, no struggle."

She flung him from her.

"I am thankful for nothing," she said defiantly.

"Lady Varley! such words just now! Look at her," said the good doctor very tenderly.

To look at the little, still, heavenly face, was to be indeed calmed. A cry broke from her in which all her heart went out. After a while she spoke.

"If I might be alone with her," she said faintly; "she and I—together!"

"I will arrange that for you," he said.

She scarcely heard him; she had taken the small dead form into her arms and was crushing it against her breast as though she could still, by her own warmth, reanimate it. She had apparently forgotten him, and presently he withdrew silently; he did not desert her, however. All that night through he sat in a chamber, apart but near, where he could see her

occasionally from the open door, and where he could direct the women who, after a little while, saw to the last solemn laying out of the peaceful little body.

By that time the gray dawn of the peaceful morning was stealing in; one of the women had drawn back a curtain, but Lady Varley, by a silent, passionate gesture, had compelled her to close it again. How was she to face another day, bereft as she was? The child seemed still with her whilst the darkness that had taken her away lasted, but to begin another day without her—she could not do that.

She sat on, beside the little bed, holding one of the child's dead hands within her own—tearless, comfortless, alone! Doctor Moore, coming in presently and seeing the strange, set look upon her face, felt a little uneasy, and touched her shoulder and said something to her in a quick, energetic way. She assented listlessly as if not understanding, and with a sharp decision he himself once more drew aside the curtains, and let a rush of early sunshine into the room.

That roused her. She started as if a knife had been plunged into her, and suddenly the anguish quickened in her eyes, and all her loss grew plain to her. But that was better than the dangerous apathy that had held her a while since. She looked haggard and wretched in the cold light of the growing day, and utterly without hope. She had no husband, and to-day she had no child; where was consolation to be looked for, under the sun?

Constantia, who had not slept, and who had spent a miserable, tear-stained night walking to and fro, and stealing every now and then to the doorway to see how it was with her, now approached timidly, and kneeling beside her, laid a nervous hand upon her knee. Lady Varley turned and looked at her with melancholy eyes. Constantia had expected an outburst, had indeed dreaded a command that would have sent her forth again, but Lady Varley's glance was calm as despair could make it, and her eyes, dry and tearless, regarded the girl without displeasure.

"It is you, Connie," she said indifferently. Then

her eyes wandered back again to the tiny corpse. A quiver ran through her that shook all her slender frame. "They have told you?" she said. "Yes, it is true. She is dead—quite dead!"

As she was speaking, Lord Varley appeared in the doorway, and stood there hesitating. Scenes were abhorrent to him. He had, of course, been told of the child's death almost immediately on its occurrence, but had shrunk from going then to his wife, knowing well that he was the last one in the world who could give her comfort of any sort. Now, at last, shame, fear of what the world would say, drove him to her presence; but though her large, wild eyes wandered to where he stood, she took no notice of him—indeed, hardly appeared to see him. She bent her head, and laid her lips upon the little cold, wan cheek.

"Dead, dead!" she said again convulsively, turning to Constantia. Great heaven! what a face it was they gazed upon! . . . She forgot them after a moment or two, and went back to her forlorn watching of her baby. There was something greedy in her expression. The tiny waxen hand was lying within hers, and as she gazed, she smoothed it softly, lovingly, oh, how tenderly! as though her very soul was wrapt in contemplation of its fairness.

"Was there ever such a little hand?" she said. "Where is its counterpart?"

She sighed heavily. Varley, after a hasty word or two to the doctor, who received them coldly, beat a hasty retreat; but his wife seemed unaware of his coming or going. In truth, she knew only, *saw* only the dead form of the child who had been her all in all.

Constantia crept close to her, and encircled her with her arms. She was frightened.

"Do not look like that," she entreated, in a low tone. "Try to think of—" she hesitated—"of heaven," she would have said, but the words died on her lips. Lady Varley pressed her arm.

"Is that your advice?" she said, with a strange smile—"to *think*! To think!" She raised her right hand to her head, and pushed back the hair

from her forehead. "You fear I shall give way," she went on presently. "Do not. The worst has come. For the future no pain can touch me. The worst is mine, my portion!" She bent over the bed with that awful hunger in her eyes that had already unnerved Constantia. But her manner was singularly calm. "How pretty she looks!" she said. "Have you noticed? My darling, my baby! Dear Lord, what have I done to Thee? What have I done?"

There was no violence in her tone; the question was breathed soft and low, to the Great Giver and—the Great Taker of all. If there was reproach in it, it was gently uttered. Her voice was subdued, as though she feared to disturb the deathless sleep of the infant.

Constantia, who was sobbing silently, still knelt beside her; but after a little while Lady Varley seemed to forget that she was there. She sat motionless, except that once or twice she stooped to caress the dead child, or murmur over it some loving word.

The doctor, who was growing seriously uneasy as he noted her manner, at last made a step forward and signed to Constantia to rise. As she did so, Lady Varley rose too, and turning, called aloud to the nurse in a sharp, imperious tone.

"It grows late," she cried. "Where is baby's bath? Surely it is past the hour! You—you——"

Dr. Moore went quickly up to her. As he caught her hands she looked vaguely into his face, then suddenly flung her arms above her head, and fell senseless to the ground.

CHAPTER XXXI.

SHOWING HOW THE WORLD WAS INCENSED BY LADY VARLEY'S IMMOBILITY; AND HOW ON ONE OCCASION SHE FLUNG HER SELF-CONTROL TO THE WINDS, AND SPOKE.

FOR many days she lay in a sort of stupor, dense enough to prevent her fully realising the extent of her loss. This seemed to those attached to her a rather merciful happening than otherwise. It spared her at least the last poignant details—the laying in the coffin, the burial, and other mournful rites.

Constantia herself placed the little body in its last bed, and bade it farewell with many tears. Such a wan, frail little creature as it looked, lying shrouded in its grave-clothes, with all the wealth of waxen blossoms round it that the weeping nurse had placed within the tiny coffin, and that were scarcely as waxen as the small, tired baby face they encircled.

It was such a mournful sight, that bit of a coffin and its inmate, that they were all silently grateful that the mother was spared the sight. Many tears were shed over it before the cruel lid hid the little one from sight, and for a long time afterwards Norah, who loved it and had often been allowed to nurse it, was inconsolable.

The day after the child had been laid within the grave, Lady Varley awoke to consciousness once more, and lay prone and passive on her pillows, but in full possession of her senses. Yet she made no mention of the dead baby. There was something in her face—a strange, new, listless expression—that convinced them more than words could do that she remembered all that had passed—that she understood how the priceless treasure that had been lent to her for so short a time, and to which she had clung with such a desperate longing, had been taken away from her for ever! Who shall say what she saw in the poor little thing to raise such a frenzy of devotion in her breast? It was sickly, weakly, barely alive; yet

because she was its mother she loved it, and cared for it, and would in truth have gladly laid down her own sad life for it. It had been snatched from her outstretched arms, and all her heart lay bleeding; but if she felt grief, she made no sign. Some of those around her at this time felt some disappointment at her seeming indifference; but Constantia, who in a vague fashion understood her, was a little frightened. She was so still. If she would speak, or show concern about anything; but she was so wonderfully still.

It was the most glorious summer weather, and the world outside the sick-room was great with life perfected. The morning had arisen with a glory unequalled, and the world of nature was up and about, and quick with a sense of joy that grew with every hour.

The sunbeams fought their way valiantly into Lady Varley's chamber through the folds of the thick curtains with a persistency that defied denial, and flung themselves broadcast upon the couch on which she lay when lifted from her bed. It was now close on noon, and still she lay there in a silent mood that threatened to last for ever. The windows were wide open, but she would not have the curtains drawn, refusing, with a wild petulance that sat strangely on her, to emerge from the gloom of the self-imposed twilight to which she now seemed to cling. Perhaps it had something to do with that past terrible hour in which she had first learned that her secret fear had become a mournful reality.

She had expressed a wish to-day that no one was to be admitted; but just now, hearing Constantia's voice upon the corridor outside, asking how she had passed the night, she suddenly lifted her head, and desired the maid in attendance to admit her visitor.

Constantia, looking pale and troubled, came in slowly, and, kneeling by her side, pressed her lips to her cheek. She had not seen her for some days, and was, in a degree, unnerved by the haggard glance that settled upon hers.

Lady Varley put out her hand, and pushed back the girl's hair from her brow.

"You are faithful, Connie," she said. "I have not wearied you to death?" Then her expression changed, and she grew ghastly. "Death! death!" she said, in an awe-struck tone.

"No; I am not wearied," said Constantia earnestly, though her heart sank within her. Would such grief as this ever know assuagement? "I came to know if you"—she hesitated; and then went on boldly—"if you would let me drive you out to-day somewhere—anywhere."

Lady Varley shrank from her.

"Oh, no; impossible!" she said. And then: "If I talked for ever I could not explain; but I think I have been badly treated. What had I done—or she——" She stopped abruptly. "Oh, my poor little baby!" she cried, pressing her hands to her eyes in a distracted fashion. She recovered herself, however, in a moment, and was once more calm and reserved as usual. "You must not mind me," she said, with a wan smile. "I have thought it all out, and why should I bore any one with my grief—a grief that is without remedy? If you will try to understand—to——"

"But I will not," cried Constantia, sinking on her knees beside her and bursting into tears. "Why should you be silent, and to me—to me who loved her?"

She threw her arms round Yolande and drew her towards her. This simple action, full of honest grief and affection as it was, did more for Lady Varley than all the doctor's stuffs. She accepted the girl's embrace, and clung to her for a while silently, and then at last the blessed rain of tears came, and bedewed her heart, and softened it, and soothed it in a measure.

Any affection she had had for Constantia before, grew now into a fuller life, that never afterwards knew any diminution in its strength. But to her alone she relaxed; with her only she permitted

herself the luxury of giving way to a grief that every day seemed to make more intolerable. Her arms were empty; there was nothing to fill them. A faithless husband, a little grave—truly her hearth was left unto her desolate!

So far as the outer world went, she seemed cold, uninteresting. Those who hastened to assure her of their sympathy, went home again to tell each other on their next meeting, that after all, delicate sentiments had been thrown away upon her, and that evidently she did not feel the death of the child nearly so much as they had been led to believe. Ah! if *they* had lost their little ones, how differently *they* would have felt; how they would have shown, by tears and sighs, the grief that was consuming them!

Lady Killeens was specially hard on her. She had called and had been received by Yolande, and had advanced towards her with uplifted brows and hands eloquently outstretched.

"Ah! this has indeed been a terrible grief!" she said, in tones carefully tremulous.

Lady Varley paused. Her eyes were on the ground; her face seemed frozen into the purest marble.

"Yes, it was a great grief," she said.

Her tone was calm. How could her visitor guess the effort the very utterance of the words cost her? How know that the hesitation was born of a wild struggle to conquer tears—that the downcast lids concealed wells of grief unspeakable?

Lady Killeens was disappointed! Was she as cold as they had all declared her? Had she been foolish in believing her warmer-hearted than most, with a terrible capacity for suffering? She went straight from Araglin to pay a visit to Mrs. Dundas, and to her recounted the unsatisfactory little scene through which she had just gone. She was a garrulous old lady, who would be talking, and she described the affair very minutely.

"She was a positive icicle," she said at last, looking to pretty Mrs. Dundas for sympathy. But

Donna's sympathy was a broken reed on which to lean. Just now she smiled. Lady Killeens' density amused her. She, Donna, had in a moment grasped the touch of tragedy in the forlorn little story. She, of all others, was able to read between the lines. Strange anomaly! The woman totally without feeling, was the one who understood best the woman, of feeling most acute!

"Icicles are deceptive," she said, with her brilliant smile. "Even as you look at them they melt away into water. Believe me, had you stayed long enough, Lady Varley would have dissolved into water too. She lowered her eyes because they were full of the hysterical moisture they call tears. She seemed to you cold, because she dreaded betraying publicly a feeling that, if once roused, she knew would be difficult to quell. Such people, of such intense emotions, are naturally a bore, and one perforce pities them, but one despises them too. Still, I think you should be rather grateful to her that she spared you a scene."

She smiled again, and stifled a faint yawn behind her fan. Why be intense, why be anything, with the thermometer at ninety? Lady Killeens, who thought the "scene" hinted at would have been more decent than Yolande's studied coldness, and who had come fully prepared for it, and was therefore annoyed and disgusted, had little to say in answer to Mrs. Dundas's sneering little speech, and presently took her departure. But she spoke of Yolande's "unnatural calmness," as she called it, wherever she went, and after a while most people believed in it—save two.

Even Lord Varley was in a certain degree deceived. Once she resumed her old duties, and sat at the head of the table and received her guests, there was little in her manner, which had always been grave and gentle, to speak of any inward, torturing regret. Her composure never forsook her. Her smile, if rarer, was always kind; and there was no reason why he should regard her as cherishing a grief that was inconsolable. He knew nothing

of the long hours spent alone in the deserted nursery, where she knelt beside the empty little cot, and prayed for patience and a speedy finish to her solitary life, and conjured up the dead past, in which her darling's pale face smiled at her again—where the tiny arms were extended to her, where the pressure of delicate baby hands fell upon her breast, her cheek. She was wasted and worn from grief, but she kept her eyes dry before the world, lest that careless thing should enter into and disturb the sacredness of her despair.

She sat before her davenport now, answering two or three letters of kindly inquiry from some acquaintances in the North. She was clad in deep mourning, and the sombre hue of her gown seemed to increase the pallor of her face. As she answered the notes of condolence, her baby's face seemed to rise before her, and great tears gathered in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. At this moment Varley, whistling gaily a light operatic air specially affected by Mrs. Dundas, strolled into the room by an open window. He had not expected to see her here, and he started visibly. Of late he was a little uncomfortable in the presence of his wife, and he would now have retired as he came, but for the fact that she had seen him, and that it was impossible for him to take no notice of her sorrow. He came towards her in a somewhat awkward fashion, and stood beside her chair. She made a vain effort to conceal her face, and shrank from him instinctively.

"I'm sorry to see you like this," he said, with an affectation of friendliness. "I had hoped you had got over it. Poor little beggar; you know she was bound to go sooner or later."

The careless tone—meant, perhaps, to be kindly—the untender allusion to her lost darling, the very uneasiness of his manner, all, maddened her. Her subdued anguish, refusing longer to be controlled, sprang into life once more, and passion, terrible in its intensity, took possession of her. It shook her as a storm might shake a fragile flower. She rose

abruptly, and pushing back her chair, looked at him with a face that was death-like in its pallor.

"It sits lightly on you!" she said, in a voice so low as to be almost inaudible. "Are you dead, then, to all feeling—honour, affection, self-respect? Has that woman killed *all*? Great heaven, what is to be the end of this? And to speak of her—*her*, my beloved, my angel!—to speak of her so!"

She had grown incoherent in her vehement reproach. Varley made a gesture as if to speak, but she would not listen to him. She clasped her hands tightly as though to compel herself to some self-restraint, and tried to speak, but could not.

"You are so excitable," he said at last; "if you would but listen—if one might be allowed to explain——"

"What?" she demanded, "your inability to feel sorrow?" Then all at once her scorn died from her, and the tears ran down her wan cheeks. "Are you her father, that you can speak thus?" she cried; "is there no grief in you—no nature? Was not her sweet body your own flesh and blood, that you can thus coldly comment on her death? Oh! where is love or pity? Oh, my darling!—my little one!—my *child*!"

It all seemed to culminate in that last word—her child. She raised her hands suddenly to her face as if to shut out from him any visible demonstration of her pain, and, with a bitter cry, she dropped, as a stone might, into her chair; her arms fell prone upon the desk, and her head found shelter on them.

Varley shrugged his shoulders. These impossible women, with their highly-wrought nerves, were—er—the very deuce! He crept cautiously from the room, fearing only that she might recover herself sufficiently to address him again before he had made good his retreat.

But she had already forgotten him; he had ceased, indeed, for a long time to be anything in her life save a vague shadow of coming disgrace or a suggestion of years wasted.

After a while she sighed heavily and raised her

head, and lay back languidly in her chair, with a sense of physical weariness that touched her not unpleasantly. The minutes came and went, and grew into hours, and twilight was already stealing over the land, when the door was again opened, and a servant announced:

“Mr. O’Grady.”

CHAPTER XXXII.

SHOWING HOW PERFECT LOVE CAN KNOW MUCH FEAR.

HE came towards her across the polished oaken floor, strewn with Oriental rugs and bits of sacred carpet, with a step swift but subdued, and with an expression in his eyes that somehow comforted her, even whilst it drove a knife into her heart. It spoke of a sympathy that had felt with her and for her, and that raised from its grave again the little fragile form that had been to her as her heart’s blood. It was the first time she had seen him since the child’s death, and remembrance was strong upon her. Yet, through all her quickened grief, she knew she was glad to see him; there was a sense of rest, of comfort in his presence. She knew that he understood her; that he would not mistake her forced composure for coldness; that he could fathom the depth of her suffering, and, having fathomed, would not accuse her of exaggeration in her grief. He was apart from and unlike all the others, she thought—save, indeed, Constantia, who had proved herself beyond doubt a friend.

“I am glad to see you,” he said gravely. He took her extended hand, and pressed it gently. He had considered what he would say to her before coming in; but now all his eloquence forsook him, as he gazed into her mournful eyes, and noted, with a wondering pain, the changes that one short month of anguish had wrought upon her face.

She was pale, hollow-eyed, hopeless. Her nights had been spent in weeping, her days in consuming regret. "Grief filled the room up of her absent child," and whitened her lips, and made tremulous the beautiful hand that used to be so softly firm.

"You have been away," she said.

"Not so far that I could not hear of you. I managed to get some news every day." His bronzed, lean face flushed, and he looked down at his hat. "Sad news," he said very gently.

"It is a month to-day," returned she, in a tone so low that he could scarcely hear her; and then all at once her fortitude forsook her, and she covered her face with her hands, and broke into bitter weeping. Before all her other visitors she had compelled herself to a calm, the strain of which upon her aching heart was terrible; but before this man, who was, after all, but a stranger to her, her strength failed, the tears sprang forth, and as they ran her heart was eased, her spirit knew relief.

"Speak to me of it," said O'Grady, in his musical, cultured voice, through which a touch of the old ineradicable brogue, rich, and soft, and tender, ran unrebuked.

"Ah, what is there to say," said she, "but that I have lost my all? I am a creature bereft of every good. When last you saw me, there was at least hope—a stricken one, perhaps—but now there is nothing."

"Still, tell me of it," he urged. "To speak will do you good. 'Give sorrow words.' They tell me you are undemonstrative, strangely silent. Surely that is not wise."

"They have told you more than that." She lifted her large, heavy eyes to his, and looked at him fixedly. "They have told you I am cold, unfeeling—a very stone! I confess that is what I have felt at times—a stone. What is there to rouse for? To show love or longing?"

"Surely there are many things—inferior to that one great treasure gone, but still of use."

"There is nothing," she said stonily. "The child is dead!" She had fallen back unconsciously

into that old frozen manner of hers, so that he was able to judge of the apparent unconcern of which her neighbours accused her, Donna alone excepted. But then he had declined to discuss the matter with Mrs. Dundas, and had openly avoided her pretty attempts at amnesty, much to that seductive matron's amusement, and a little to her chagrin.

"Who shall forbid you to dwell upon that sad fact?" said he. "But I would have you regard it in a different spirit. Surely life is not so altogether barren, so entirely bereft of joy, that you should thus give up all your best years to a sorrow uncontrollable."

"It is a simple thing to you to give advice like that," she said, with a faint touch of reproach in her gentle voice. "But you—you have not known."

"Yes, yes, I see. I know what you would say." He spoke quite humbly now, and leant towards her. "'Every one can master a grief but he that has it.'" Yes, that is entirely true. But I did not come here to trouble you, only to try to help you; and now, almost in the beginning, I have gone completely wrong. Yet——" he paused, and looked at her reflectively—"I would be of some good to you if I could."

"I know it. I know that," she cried, a little wildly. "But who can help me? 'My grief lies all within.' It destroys me as it grows. And every moment seems to add a cubit to its stature." She rose, and swept by him, the deep crape of her gown seeming to add a certain intensity to her woe. She walked up and down the room in silence for a minute or two, and then burst forth again, as though silence was torture to her—she, who before his coming had felt silence her only security.

"It is all here," she said, stopping with some abruptness before him, and laying her hand upon her heart. "Day by day the ache grows keener. It will kill me soon, I trust."

"Consider!" he said, rising in his turn with abruptness to his feet. "You hardly know what you say. You think only of your grief. There are others——" He checked himself passionately.

"There is no one," she said. "And for myself I

do not care. I have been hardly used. I——” She paused, and struggled with herself for composure. “I asked—I demanded—I—I prayed upon my bended knees all night and half my days, that that one thing should be granted me by heaven. That one poor little life I wrestled for—no more, no more—but it was denied me! Why should I be thankful, grateful, as they tell me I should be, for life itself, when its sweets are dragged from my very arms?”

She appealed to him with large, miserable eyes, and hands outstretched. Her heart seemed full to overflowing. O’Grady, by a gentle movement, led her to her chair and compelled her to reseal herself. She was so wasted, so worn a thing that he feared excitement for her. When he would have released her hand she still clung to it in a girlish, imploring fashion, and so he sat beside her holding her palm in his, without a suspicion of passion, or anything less sad and sacred than her dire affliction.

“You dwell so keenly on your own loss that you forget her gain,” he said, alluding to the little one for whom she was pining. “Is any life, even the most joyous here, so desirable a thing that you would have her quit the glories of the celestial land to join it? That pure, angelic spirit is now beyond the reach of pain, and grief, and disappointment, and care, and all the ills to which we two, and all the rest of our world, are heirs. Let her rest in her sweet peace. Do not desire her return. From rapture, pure and unalloyed, to a happiness imperfect as ours is, even in its most perfect state, would be but a poor exchange indeed.”

“Ah! There is truth in that,” she said. Her face remained fixed in its mournful seeming, but from her sad eyes two large tears distilled themselves and ran down her pale cheeks. Others followed them. But the angry rebellion against the powers above had died from her, and her face was softened.

Then, something moving him, he began to speak to her, to picture to her the happy life of the child in that realm whither, as yet, she could not follow her. He was ever an earnest man who followed the right

as well as in him lay, and eschewed the wrong, but it had never dawned upon him, until this hour, that he had indeed a thirst for things divine. The beauty, the holiness of the unseen life had entered into him, and taken possession of him, whilst yet he lay in ignorance of it.

To himself it was a marvel how he thus delineated to her the perfection of the life to come. The style, the subject was foreign to him, yet he fancied, nay, he *knew*, that all he pictured he believed, and that the grandeur of the idea that the little child had reached high heaven and a Father's care and love, and was for ever (ah, the splendour of that thought!), *for ever* free and absolved from earthly stain and grief, was glorious to him.

Later on he smiled to himself as he recalled that hour. But the smile had no scepticism in it, and was born more of surprise than of agnostic doubt.

Just then, however, he was not smiling. He had entered into her sorrow with an acuteness that should have warned him, and was conscious of a sense of triumphant relief as he saw her sad eyes clear beneath his words, and her expression of fixed despair give way to a tender submission.

The twilight deepened. The perfume from the gardens without was wafted softly inwards, and from a hundred tiny nests the last sweet crooning of the birds broke forth. All spoke of rest, of peace, of joy, to be again renewed—and bathed in it, the mother's heart took courage and woke again to hope. Beyond the twilight, the growing darkness, there was a glorious light, where she and her little one might meet heart to heart again.

O'Grady rose to bid her farewell. Now a sense of shame, of humiliation was full upon him. That he, the man of the world, careless of most things, should have dared to open out to this sweet saint a suggestion of a higher life, seemed presumptuously absurd. He bent over her hand and tried to murmur something of what he felt, but she did not hear him.

"You will come again?" she asked anxiously. She looked quite beautiful in the dying sunset, in

her long crape robes, with that rapt expression on her face, and O'Grady found himself lowering his eyes guiltily before hers. There was no doubt of the sincerity of her desire to see him again. To see him, however, frequently, would in all probability be nothing to her, would not lead her one pin's point beyond the spot on which she now stood; but with him, how would it be? To be near her often, to grow familiar with those sweet eyes, and parted lips——

He pulled himself together with a little start, and took her hand and said "Good-bye" in as orthodox a fashion as was possible.

"Thank you. I shall have few pleasures so desirable as this you have offered me," he said, smiling pleasantly. He did not hold her hand the eighth part of a minute, though he knew he would have given a good many years of his life to have held and kissed it. He got through the ordeal very well, however, and presently found himself outside the door, conscious of only two things—that he had not betrayed himself, and that her eyes had followed him until the *portière* had hidden him from sight.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SHOWING HOW TWO ACCOMPLISHED DIPLOMATISTS CAME TO
LOGGERHEADS.

It was close on midnight. Mrs. Dundas was at home to-night, and a considerable portion of the county was at home with her. Her evenings were sufficiently attractive, with the slight touch of foreign manner that ran through them, and the vague, delicious sense of something forbidden that lay underneath the outward respectability—and that might at any moment break into a fuller life—to draw to her all the younger portions of the community, and with them, of course,

the heads. There was always a little music at these *réunions*, very good; there was also a little conversation, good too, though decidedly bad—strange paradox! But of course this belonged to the few, and the junior members knew nothing of it. There was dancing of a delightfully desultory sort, that ended in prolonged half-hours in shady, scented conservatories; and in a couple of snug, cosy little apartments that led off the drawing-room there were cards.

A gentle manipulation on the part of the hostess had driven all the elderly squires and their spouses, who were addicted to a mild whist with its sixpenny points, into one of these rooms; the other was reserved for a livelier game, in which she herself seldom failed to take part. The excitement of it was a sort of stimulant that set her pulses throbbing and her blood aflame; it redeemed the dullness of the neighbourhood, and made her almost content with the emotionless life she led with Mr. Dundas. Lately, even this pleasure had failed her a little, and she had striven to entice it back to her by playing for bolder and heavier stakes.

As the clock chimed midnight, she rose from the table a considerable loser. For a respectable country-house game, the loss was indeed altogether beyond bounds. She had lost principally to Featherston, who, since that affair at the masked ball, had been, she felt, her avowed enemy. His silken manner, and the scrupulousness of his behaviour generally, did not deceive her as to the fact that he had not, and never would, forgive her. That little deception about the cross on the shoulder of the domino had rankled in his mind, and bred, and borne bitter fruit.

She rose from the table this man's debtor to a considerable degree; she rose smiling, however, though she hardly knew how she was to pay him. To appeal to her husband would, of course, produce the sum required without a second's hesitation—a hundred and fifty would be little or nothing to him—but Mr. Dundas had a prejudice against high play in his own house, and Donna felt it would be an act of folly to betray to him the fact that she, the mistress of it, had

been the one to lead the ball in that direction. High play he abhorred as a vulgarity, an unpardonable *bêtise* when committed beneath one's own roof. At one's club—why, yes. In that lay all the difference: that was every man's ground, the other was *his* ground only—and hers.

She beat the ground a little angrily with her foot as she comprehended all this, but she smiled so sweetly as she did it that no one noticed her irritation, except Featherston. He followed her to the door, and in the vestibule beyond, that led to the drawing-room, laid his hand lightly on her arm.

"A moment," he said, so delicately that it might have deceived any one save her.

"As many as you will," she said, a little sharply; sharply, too, she shook his hand from her arm. "But if you have anything to say, say it as quickly as may be; I am wanted in the drawing-room."

"I am sure wherever you may be, you are always wanted somewhere else," replied he suavely. "Yet that fact, it appears, did not occur to you until——"

"I found I was in a luckless vein," interrupted she impatiently. "Is that what you would say? Have no fear, sir," she looked at him with an insolence not to be surpassed, "you shall be paid."

"You mistake me," he said, with a smile that chilled her; "the debt is on my side. I owe you that which I fear I never can repay."

She bit her lip, and then burst out laughing.

"Ah! that absurd affair about the dominoes," she cried gaily. "Did it hurt you so much, then? Was the pretty *Constantia ruffica*? Has she been relentless since? Is *that* your grievance? Truly, my dear Featherston, you must have lived in an ideal world up to this to take so much to heart so mild a sling of the outrageous fortune that threatens us all hourly. The thought of a moment should not so affect you."

"It was the thought of many moments. You purposely deceived me; you have done me a wrong not to be undone!"

"How, then? If I mistake not, your impassioned syllables that night were meant for me; I did

not receive them—true; and if she did, why, it opened her eyes, that is all.”

“For that opening I have you to thank.” For the moment his courteous calm forsook him, and his words came with a disagreeable force from between his lips, and his eyes flashed. “It was a studied deception,” he said. “You lied to me.”

“An ugly word, my friend,” said she, with a pale smile.

“It is possible you heard it before,” returned he.

She made an impatient movement that brought her more beneath the influence of the swinging lamp that hung in the vestibule. It caught her now, and lit up her red hair into a brighter glory, and showed the glitter of her lovely eyes, and the alabaster whiteness of her skin. Her arms were bare from the shoulders, and exquisitely moulded, and the hands clasped beneath were clenched angrily.

“*You* speak to me of morality,” said she, in a low, mocking tone. “You! who felt no qualms about making love to another man’s wife, even while your heart was given to a young and guileless girl! You!” She threw up her head with a scorn unutterable. “I defy any one to say I have done no good thing in my life,” she said, “when I can prove I have been the means of parting her from you. Constantia is a production of this curious age, too uncommon to be thrown away.”

“I understand that remark! It is one thing more to be grateful for. I have not forgotten the past that lies between us, in which you let your humour have full play—at my expense. But you went a trifle too far when you deliberately planned to separate me from the only woman I shall ever love. You thought you had me at your feet; that I was another of your fatuous slaves, believing all things, hoping all things, enduring all things, but I tell you——” He paused for a moment as though to gather breath, and then the veneer fell from him, the smooth, soft accent vanished, and he stood face to face with her, with

venom written in open characters upon his rather low brow. He had slipped the mask for once, and the real man, poor and splenetic, stood naked,—“that never for one moment did your image displace hers from my heart. Constantia beside you gleamed as a star within a cloud. Had the necessity arisen, I would at any time have flung you aside for her; and now, by your evil machinations, she is lost to me.”

Another woman beneath this insult might have shown vehement displeasure, and so given joy to her adversary. Donna knew better. She sank into a chair near her, and gave way to that noiseless, irritating laughter of hers. It was hardly acting on her part; she was honestly amused. The man's conceit was so entire; his belief that he was galling her by his declared preference for another, so earnest.

When her silent mirth had come to an end, she sighed as if in sorrow for it, and looked up at him, to grow once more diverted by the indignant anger on his face.

“You are enchanting. You are exceptional,” she cried lightly. “You should cultivate an air like that. It is unique—unpurchasable! If you posed just so as the Giaour to some eminent artist, you would make yourself famous. Well, what is it now? You look big with importance yet. Get it over, and you will feel ever so much the better for it.”

“You think the day is yours, and that I have grossly exaggerated the facts stated. But you forget that a limit overreached is dangerous, and that there is reason in everything.”

“Tut!” she answered gaily. “There you err. There isn't a spark of it in you.”

At this moment two or three people entered the room, and stood chatting together at the lower end. Mrs. Dundas, who was equal to most emergencies, lowered her voice without a seeming effort, and bestowed a smile on Featherston, warm with the kindest friendliness.

Featherston, however, was beyond care for the morrow.

"Jeer as you will," he said, in a tone distinctly incensed, "I shall always——"

"To rave in a crowd is to feel small in the morning," she put in easily, still with her charming smile. "In spite of you I befriend you, you see."

"From this hour there is no friendship between us," returned he, with a frown, but his voice was lowered, and that was all she wanted.

"As you will," she said sweetly, smiling down a yawn very successfully indeed. "Ah!" as her own name came to her from a room near, "there they are, calling upon me to sing them something. I fear I have given you too much time already. But how the minutes run when spent in the society of one thoroughly appreciated! I must *drag* myself away. There are the exigencies of the hostess to be remembered. I have too long neglected them because," with a brilliant glance, "of *you*. It desolates me to leave you; yet what will you? I am a slave, a captive; beyond lie my tyrants."

She waved her hand airily to him, and swept past him with a bewildering glance and a deprecating shake of her lovely head that illustrated quite a poignancy of regret at having thus abruptly to relinquish the happiness of being with him.

The insolence of it all was so astounding that Featherston stood staring after her, speechless, immovable. She swept by him into the next room, and from where he stood he could hear the murmur of voices round the piano, and understood that she was being pressed to sing. As she did most things, she sang extremely well, with a *verve*, a *brio*, that startled when her choice ran on French ballads, and with a pathos (that startled even more because so unexpected from her), strong and passionately tender, when she permitted herself an English or Irish song.

He knew her touch upon the piano, the few delicately yet firmly-executed chords that preluded her song; and then her voice broke forth in a little air she was absurdly fond of—the words half life, half gloom: joy mingled with a surely coming despair!

A song one would have thought wonderfully unsuited to her!

So fulfilled with joy was she,
Life was like a summer sea,
 So light—so free!
Wintry blasts can come and go,
Here are storms, and sleet, and snow,
 Heigho!

Sunny flowers, and bird-songs meet
For one with love low at her feet,
 So fond, so sweet!
Rosebuds rain-killed, die ere blown,
Death, as life, is lightly sown.
 We sigh! We moan!

Long she watched the summer through,
Blossoms withered, song-birds flew.
 Eheu!
Night, like day, comes soon or late;
Here, black-mantled, creeps dark fate;
Hope is dead, now mourns its mate.

She sang it in a rather whimsical fashion, and rose laughing from the piano. She resisted their entreaties to sing again, and passed through them with a light and playful touch here and there, disappearing from amongst them almost before they knew she was gone.

She went swiftly through the hall towards a small room that opened from it, and that was half library, half boudoir. It was an inspiration of her own, and she delighted in it. No one entered it without her permission, and a balcony running outside the windows of it was connected with the one that led to the dancing-room, and also with another room of hers—one more private still—in which the last great act of her life was played. She walked swiftly to the windows, saw that they were fastened, and pulled the curtains closely across them. She had pencilled a few words upon a card, and given it to a footman, and now stood in the centre of this, her favourite room, awaiting the answer to it. It came quickly. Lord Varley pushed open the door, and advanced eagerly towards her.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

SHOWING HOW A RATHER IMPORTANT SUBJECT CAME
UNDER DISCUSSION.

"I CAME at once," he said.

"Rather too soon, I fear. Did any one notice you?"

"No, I took care of that." A quick sigh broke from him. "I am tired of this eternal deception," he said; "I wish it was at an end for ever."

"Not more than I do."

"End it, then," he said boldly.

"That would be a lighter matter for you than for me. In cases of that sort, women go to the wall, whilst men are pardoned and taken back to the social bosom. Well," slowly, "I shall think of it." The dreamy look passed from her face, and she straightened herself. "It was not to talk to you of this I sent for you," she said, "but of something more pressing! I have been annoyed. I am worried beyond my strength. I have lost money to Featherston, and I don't know how to represent the matter to—to my lord and master," she laughed slightly, "so as to get it out of him."

"To Featherston?"

"Yes; in that lies the sting. If it had been any one else, I should not have cared so much, because any one else could have waited."

"But Featherston—surely he did not——"

"No, no; that is not it," impatiently. "It is that I so detest him, I will not owe him a shilling for a day even. The difficulty is how to manage it. Unfortunately, it was only this morning I received my half-yearly cheque from Mr. Dundas; but that was mortgaged long ago, and I despatched it by post to stop the mouth of my dressmaker. If Dundas were anybody else there would be no necessity for so much thought, but he sets such great store by his coffers, that I dislike appealing to him."

"Yet he is liberal to you?" questioned Varley.

"To me—yes; but at heart he is close as close can be. He has hitherto denied me nothing, simply because I have not gone beyond bounds in the asking; but if I ask for this sum now, I shall be subjected to a cross-examination that I confess"—with an angry little laugh—"is sure to disagree with my temper. However, what must be, must be. Advise me how to put the request."

"I should advise not to put it at all. Why should you? Let me be your banker now, as in those good old days when I backed you at baccarat and lansquenet in Venice, Rome, Vienna."

"You!" she said, "oh, no!" She coloured a little, and frowned.

"Why not? Pshaw! From you to me such unfriendliness is absurd. Be sensible, and let me help you in this matter."

"To take money from you——" she said, and then broke off impetuously, and flung herself into a chair. She clasped her hands behind her head, and turned her eyes upon the wall opposite—a dark-brown wall with an oaken dado and a frieze of palest yellow. The room looked curiously pretty in the soft glare of the lamps, with its Persian prayer-rugs cast here and there upon the floor, the tall palms in the corners, the open, hospitable, glassless bookcases. The low brass fender shone brilliantly, catching the light as it fell; and there was a great deal of early English pottery in the quaintly carved cabinets that were now black with age. Upon the walls, Queen Anne cupboards held cups and bowls of Chelsea ware, and were rich in priceless Wedgewood.

"Tut! what signifies it?" said Varley. "Why should you know annoyance that a mere insignificant slip of paper can assuage? I have no cheque with me, but see"—gaily—"you shall have an I O U from me, that will do as well. To-morrow I will bring you gold to the amount needed."

He dipped a pen in ink, and wrote upon a sheet of paper lying on the table near, and held it out to her. But she pushed it back to him with a petulant movement. An exclamation broke from him. He flung

the paper upon the table, and going to her, dropped on his knees beside her chair, and as one sure of being unrebuked, encircled her with his arms.

"My beloved! my soul!" he whispered, "why are you so strange to me? You refuse this paltry gift of mine; yet what is there I would not give you? Myself, my life, my wealth, my honour, are in your hands if you will but accept them. Donna, think of it. Why should our lives be wasted; we have given a trial long enough to the absurd laws that hedge in respectability, and I think you, as well as I, have found them wanting. Put a finish to it; come with me to India, Canada, wherever on earth you will."

"Mr. Fronde's idealised Australia, for example," said she, laughing. She leant back and regarded him curiously. "And what of Lady Varley?" she said.

"That question might as well apply to Dundas. Why answer it? We go—they rest. In the new life I would create for us, memory of the past would have no part; we should forget all that has been in the joy of our present."

"A modern Arcadia." She smiled, and laid her fingers, with a dainty, caressing gesture, upon his lips. "Well, I confess the picture is tempting," she said; "the very audacity of it fetches me. To compel the waters of Lethe to flow over one sounds charmingly dictatorial. And then—I have grown so weary of all this!" throwing out her hands to the room with a comprehensive wave that meant all she had not said. "The people are so tame, so good, one's very *méchancetés* fall flat. Everything is tasteless, dull; it is always November here, both in mind and manner. I have made the discovery that a perfectly unimpeachable husband is an unmitigated bore, and that his friends are not as mine should be. But yet—to break through all——"

"To gain freedom," cried he vehemently. He rose to his feet and drew her up with him. "Oh, for another world!" he exclaimed passionately, "where we two might be alone—we two together."

He had her in his arms now; her lovely head lay

upon his breast, and her eyes, brilliant as stars, were gazing upward into his. She was trembling slightly, though her lips were parted in a happy smile, as she rested, passion-pale, in his embrace. This warm pallor rested on her lightly, as might a veil, and added another charm to her beauty. Never had she seemed so lovely as now, when she looked at him in a tremulous silence, her large eyes alight with love—unholy.

“We two!” she whispered back to him, so faintly that the words seemed but the offspring of a sigh; in this sigh, however, lay consent.

“And now for the dry details,” cried he presently, in a radiant tone. “Oh, to be rid of this stagnant existence soon!—soon!” He seemed on the instant younger, full of a fiery gladness, with all the vigour of freshest youth upon him. “What land will suit you best—what clime—what people?”

“Any people, so long as there are plenty of them,” returned she gaily, falling into his humour. “A humdrum existence, with two or three prosy county families to drop in once a week to discuss their servants and their children, disagrees with me—as you see. Let there be change, Frederic, whatever else there be. I have a trick of growing weary; if Mr. Dundas had conquered that fact he would probably have escaped this hour.”

“And I should have lost you—twice. I have much to thank him for his native dulness. Yes, you shall have change.”

“You strengthen your cause. To roam the earth, to be for ever moving, that is my dream of bliss. And to roam it with—you!”

She threw into her tone an access of tenderness that thrilled him. It was certainly unfeigned. She leaned a little backwards, and looked at him with a soft, slow smile, the witchery of which intoxicated him. And she was his! Of her own free will she had at last given herself. The memory of that cruel past, in which she had betrayed and abandoned him, faded now beneath the rapture of the present possession.

"Wherever we go, however," she said, "be sure our sin, in the shape of Mr. Dundas, will find us out. Will he sue for a divorce, I wonder?"

"I hope so."

"Why? What good would that do us? Do you know your saintly wife so little as not to understand that she would endure anything rather than forego her rôle of martyr. That will be beer and skittles to her, if one dare make such a remark about a creature so decidedly too 'good for human nature's daily food.' No, my friend, you will not get your divorce."

"There must be some way to compel her," said Varley, frowning.

"I think not. There is nothing so mulishly obstinate as your good woman. But it is of little consequence," cried she gaily "I am sick of marriage. To be bound is to long to rend one's chains. If we tire," with a little shrug, "why, we can separate."

"Never!" said Varley warmly. "Tire! Oh, no, I will not believe it. You love me too well for that."

"I did not apply the suggestion wholly to myself," said she, smiling. "Men, too, have been known to change. The matter is hardly worth an argument, however, as I think I have studied my drag-chain sufficiently well to know that he will shoot you first, and seek a divorce afterwards. That would be awkward for us; for me more than you, as you would be out of it. Those silent men always make themselves unpleasant—they should be marked dangerous. There is but one chance in the matter—that *you* should shoot *him*. That would square the difficulty at once."

At this instant the sound of a heavy footfall on the far end of the corridor without, fell on their ears. Donna started.

"Bluebeard, *in propria personâ*," she whispered hurriedly. "Pull back the curtains. No; do not go yet, he may have heard our voices." The steps had ceased. "He is now looking at the moon, and thinking of me, and studying the stars. I wonder what

they tell him of his future destiny?" she said, with a sneer. "Truly, there is no fool like an old one!"

The heavy tread commenced again, and came nearer. The moon, now the curtains had been softly pushed back, shone with a cold brilliance into the room; and outside, against the white stonework of the balcony, they could see a stalwart figure that looked almost gigantic in the uncertain gloom without, drawing leisurely towards them. The massive head, the calm, powerful face became at last visible. Donna caught his eye, and made a pretty gesture of invitation to him.

"Now go," she said in an undertone to Varley, who was not slow to accept the hint. In spite of the folly of such a weakness, it is always a trifle embarrassing to be obliged to make civil speeches to a man upon whose wife you have set your affections—with success.

Varley went towards the door, but passing the table his eye fell upon the bit of paper with the compromising I O U scribbled on it, and taking it hastily he held it out to her. He had barely time after that to leave the room without any show of undue hurry, when Mr. Dundas entered it by the window.

CHAPTER XXXV.

SHOWING HOW HAPPY MR. DUNDAS WAS IN THE PURE
AND UNADULTERATED AFFECTION OF HIS WIFE.

DONNA swept gracefully up to him and slipped her hand through his arm. He lifted it and pressed it reverentially to his lips. His beautiful Donna—his own—his wife! What a word that was! How sacred! How holy!

"That was Varley, was it not?" he said, as he stood stroking her hand,

"Yes, he has gone to get me an ice; he will be back presently."

"But, my darling, is it wise to remain so long away from your guests? I missed you some time since. You see," with a grave, tender smile, "I miss you always—I can feel when you are far from me."

"Ah! that is so sweet of you," she said fondly, gratefully. No one could tell by her gleaming, smiling eyes, that she was inwardly execrating him for his troublesome surveillance, prompted as it was by a still more troublesome affection. "And have I been long? I was feeling so wearied, so tired, trying to keep up the spirits of these heavy country folk, that at last I gave in and crept in here to gain a little rest. Rest denied me," she went on with a pathetic little sigh, "as Lord Varley unfortunately came into the room, and finding me, thought it his duty, I suppose, to entertain me." She shrugged her shoulders. "*Such* entertainment!" she said disdainfully. "I wished him many miles away. But that is ungrateful, is it not?" with pretty self-condemnation. "He is always so kind, so good."

"He is a good fellow *au fond*, I do believe," said John Dundas warmly, "though now and then one hears a whisper about him and his treatment of his wife."

"A white mouse of a thing like that!" cried she gaily. "Pouf! who could spend an unbroken lifetime with her? She is so still, so cold, so entirely incapable of a ripple anywhere. Poor Lord Varley, one is compelled to pity him." She spoke very lightly, airily, as though the topic were of a breath's importance. Now she turned her soft, Madonna-like face up to his, and leant her head back against his shoulder. "If *I* were like that," she whispered, "you would not have missed me a while since, believe me; you would not love me as you love me now. You *do* love me, you naughty boy?" Her glance changed suddenly from a lovely tenderness to a coquetry more lovely still. He pressed her head down fondly against his heart.

"Too well—too well!" he said, little dreaming how deadly true was the assurance. "And whatever you were I should miss you always. I am not myself without you."

"What! not even when you are trudging through your priceless turnips, and counting up your immaculate shorthorns?" He could not see the slight sneer that curved her lip as she said this in her low, *trainante* voice. Then some mischievous fiend taking possession of her, she went on deliberately: "And so I am indispensable to your lordship's happiness? And how then would it be, were you to miss me altogether, some day?"

"That will not be, sweetheart. My span of life must needs be shorter than yours. *You* will be the one to have to mourn!"

Her face was still hidden against his heart, which was well, as such a delicious sense of amusement took hold of her at the folly of the word, mourn, as applied to her, that she broke into one of her fits of silent mirth, and had much ado to conceal it. She was, however, equal to the occasion. She buried her face in his bosom closer still, as if in an access of grief; and indeed he did believe, poor fool, that the gentle agitation of her frame meant sorrow, deep and profound, at even this bare suggestion of losing him!

"Donna! how absurd! My dear one, to think you should so suffer at a word! Come, now, lift up your head! See! Lord Varley will be returning presently with your ice, and it will never do for him to find you so distressed. Why, they will tell tales everywhere of me; call me a cruel ogre, and you a beauty in distress; I shall have Varley in the character of a gallant knight, arriving here to rescue you, and carry you away from me!"

The farce was growing louder every moment. Donna, however, subdued herself. She released herself in part from his arms.

"You can jest!" she said reproachfully.

"At such silly babies as you," replied he, with infinite tenderness. "Would I have you still in tears

when Varley came? By-the-bye," with the hope of making a diversion in her sad thoughts, "what was that he gave you just as I came in?"

Donna started slightly. But her self-possession did not desert her.

"If you will take me out to the balcony," she said, in a low, choked little tone, "I will tell you. He may come at any moment, and to see one's eyes red——" She pressed her handkerchief to them. Yes. The balcony in the darkness will be best. He will not be able to see her face there as she tells her lies.

With his arm round her, he drew her out to the calm, cool night without. He had forgotten her absence from her guests, all, save the sweet fact that she was weeping and distressed at the bare thought of some day losing him.

"Now tell me about it," he said cheerfully, with a view to lifting her out of her tender depression. "What was this thing he gave you, eh?"

"A cheque!" said she, with a soft sigh, supposed to be born of her great grief. It was a very careful thing, her leaving the well-lit room before making this avowal. She could, however, have drawn upon her imagination, which was inexhaustible, for half-a-dozen answers to his question, but a sense of reckless delight in telling the truth so far, and taking a rise out of "Bluebeard," enchanted her.

"A cheque, my love? For what?"

"For my old ladies," said Donna, who was extravagantly kind to the old alms-women in the parish. She went to see them very often, and delighted their dull old hearts by her gay laughter; and for herself she found a fund of entertainment in them. She gave them tea publicly, and tobacco on the sly, and smuggled in every now and then considerably more wine than was good for them. She was such a fresh joy to those tottering, sickly old souls, that they counted the hours that lay between her last visit and her next.

"Your demoralised old ladies, you should say," said Dundas, with a twinkle in his kindly eyes. He

was bent on bringing her back to her usual brightness; this time he succeeded. Mrs. Dundas having come to the conclusion that she had mourned long enough, and that she might now return to her former state, took this opportunity to break into merry laughter.

"How that good soul the rector lets himself be cheated!" she said. "I firmly believe he knows all about the tobacco and the wine, but he winks at it. Oh, yes, it was for my old dames I was begging to Lord Varley. You see I lose no opportunity; I levy my taxes wherever I be."

"And he responded to your petition?" glancing at the paper in her hand.

"Generously." She tightened her grasp on the cheque as she spoke. It was in her left hand. Her right being free she lifted it, and pressed it—a dainty, cool, sweet little thing—beneath his chin. "He was not so stingy as you were this morning," she said. "Parsimonious old boy that you are!"

She could see that his eyes were on the slip of paper, and lowering her lids she played gently with it, letting the delicate night wind catch it here, and flicking it with her fingers in an idle fashion when the wind died. Men say women are devoid of humour. Donna at least was an exception. A sense of keenest appreciation of the danger of the moment, and the absurd side of it, too, so caught Donna, and grew upon her undisciplined soul to such an extent, that her eyes lit with laughter, and she stood there almost hoping that he would demand a view of it. In all probability he would; and then—the way out of it? It would require wit, readiness. It was a situation such as her soul delighted in. She was unfeignedly disappointed when she saw he did not mean to press the matter; that he was entirely devoid of any jealous suspicion.

"There is, as I have said, good in him," said Dundas, speaking approvingly of Varley. "*Generously*, you said?"

"Yes. He has given me all that I asked, and more," returned she ambiguously. It was absurd

being careful about one's speeches with such a dullard as this. "By-the-bye, our guests! They must be trebly anxious about our reappearance by this time. If we do not make some sign, they will be having the ponds and lakes and rivers dragged for our drowned bodies. Come, let us frustrate their hopes."

She moved towards the window.

"Stay, Donna," said he suddenly. He was made a little uncomfortable by this tale of Varley's generosity towards the old alms-women. How good she was in her ministrations to them, and what a niggardly hand was his that held back anything from her in so just a cause! "Stay," he said, and she turned at once and came back to him with the sweet, friendly smile that made the whole wide world so beautiful to him. "Varley has put me to shame," he said, with a pleasant laugh. "I will not be outdone by him in your good graces and those of your ancient pensioners. To-morrow come to me, and I will give you what will keep them *en fête* for many a day."

"You are worse than Varley," she said. "Thank you, a thousand times."

"Talking of him, I wonder he has never returned with that ice," said Dundas.

"Probably he did return, and not seeing me went away again. And we"—she flung a tender glance at him (it cost her nothing, and was good practice)—"when two people (two old married people, too!) are so foolishly wrapt up in each other as we have been for the past half-hour, they would not, I am afraid, notice the coming or going of any one. Ah!"—she laughed saucily—"you have much to answer for."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

SHOWING HOW O'GRADY SMOTE AND SPARED NOT.

VARLEY, when he had left her presence, had passed hurriedly through the hall, and being in a mood that desired solitude above all other good, made for a room little frequented and but dimly lit, where he felt sure he might find himself alone. He flung open the door, closed it as vehemently, and throwing himself into a chair gave himself up to thought. A smile, bright, glad, victorious, broke over his face. There was triumph, indeed, in every feature. He threw out his arms as if to a foe vanquished, and in his excitement, his feverish exultation, the hope within him caught sound, and he spoke aloud,

"Time, time alone," he cried, in a clear, vibrating tone, "and opportunity are all I want. And then—riddance of this cursed stagnation, and life—*with her!*"

Something seemed to rise out of the dark corner before him to confront him as he spoke: a tall, indistinct shape, that after a while resolved itself into O'Grady. He looked leaner, darker, more bronzed than ever in the uncertain light as he stood up and looked silently at Varley.

The latter sprang to his feet with an oath.

"Where the deuce have you come from?" he said then. There was insolence in his tone. Had the fellow heard—understood? He watched him with a lowering brow, and nervous, shifting eyes.

"Where the deuce have *you* come from? would be more to the purpose," said O'Grady, in his slow, methodical way. There was, however, a ring in his voice that spoke of anger, contempt, and a suppressed rage that bordered on disgust.

"What do you mean?" said Varley, drawing a step nearer. His blood was surging in his veins, and he was in that humour when a man would go as quickly to seek a quarrel as a kiss from the beloved.

"Do you compel me to answer? Is an answer necessary?" In his turn O'Grady had moved a little; he was now much nearer to the man addressed. His eyes were glowing; he waited for Varley's next word.

"Speak," said Varley peremptorily.

"You do compel me, then!" said the other coldly. "Well, hear me! For many days it has been upon my mind to tell you what I think of you; to give you my true and unvarnished opinion of your conduct. To-night you generously" (with a sneer) "offer me an opportunity. I accept it. I——"

"You! Who are you, sir?" broke in Varley fiercely. "What the devil do you mean by bringing me to task? What do you know of me?"

"Very little, sir, I acknowledge; which is to my credit, I fancy. But that little is bad. In my opinion," said O'Grady, with the utmost calmness, "you are a *most consummate scoundrel!*"

"What?" said Varley, in a low tone.

He seemed paralysed. He placed a trembling hand on the back of the chair near him as if to support himself, and his face grew livid. His rage was so great that it mastered him, and deprived him of energy for the moment.

"Haven't you grasped it?" said O'Grady, with a curl of the lip. "Must I explain?" Then all at once his manner changed, and his studied calm deserted him. Passion, fierce and strong, conquered prudence, and came to the front. "You!" he said. "Are you a devil or a man, that you treat that creature so? An angel given you from heaven! There are some who would think it their highest good to be able to minister to her happiness; whilst you—you!—cast the sacred gift from you, and scorn, and insult, and betray her for one unfit to be named in her presence. Great heaven! that such things should be! And what is to be the end of it? Do you think the world is blind? Do you think your assignation with that woman to-night was unknown?—that no one saw the delivery of her note to you? Does it ever

dawn upon you that that little tale will be carried home to *her* to plant another dagger in her gentle breast? Has she not suffered enough already at your hands? Is there no——”

Varley put up his arm. The gesture was so imperious that O’Grady paused, and regarded him with expectancy. The pause was lengthened. Varley’s face was as white as death, and his nostrils were distended. At last he spoke :

“Your wonderful solicitude for Lady Varley deserves my warmest gratitude,” he said, with an evil laugh. “I thank you—in her name. Your manner, though no doubt one of your strongest points, is, I confess, a little mystifying to so dull a mortal as I am. It leads me to imagine that you believe I no longer have an interest in Lady Varley. It even leads me to believe that *you*”—he looked straight at his adversary, and again that evil laugh broke forth—“*want her.*”

The deadly insult to his wife had hardly passed his lips when O’Grady had him by the throat. The tall, thin, powerful man swung him to and fro in his paroxysm of rage and disgust as lightly as though Varley (who was a well-grown man) was but a child within his grasp. The latter did his best to retaliate, but, infuriated though he was, his efforts were vain. He could not shake off O’Grady’s hand, long and sinewy as it was, and firm as iron, though delicate enough to look at. The two men glared at each other savagely, speechless, but maddened with a hatred that would never know abatement. Then suddenly Varley’s face changed. The veins swelled ominously upon his forehead. His breath grew laboured, and came at last in little stifled pants. His hold on O’Grady relaxed. Some passionately angry thought within the latter had perhaps induced him unconsciously to tighten his grasp on his enemy’s throat.

A dry, painful sob burst from Varley’s lips, which already were growing discoloured. O’Grady, hearing it, was suddenly dragged back to a remembrance of all he still owed to life, and life to him. His

fingers instinctively opened without entirely losing their hold, and his eyes shot fire as they looked into Varley's.

"See!" he said, with a touch of rather devilish satisfaction in the thought, "I shake you as I would a rat! *So! so!* Now go!" He hurled him back against the wall. "And repent if it be in you!"

He put a chair out of his way in a light, strong fashion, and with a steady step left the room.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

SHOWING HOW MISS MACGILLICUDDY SUFFERED DEADLY INSULT; AND HOW SHE WAS INEXPRESSIBLY SHOCKED BY GARRETT BARRY.

CONSTANTIA'S feeling towards Featherston had undergone a considerable change since that night of Mrs. Dundas's masked ball. A change, cruel indeed, because it is always terrible to the young when the first doubt, the first distrust of the one thing beloved dawns upon the mind. She had believed so entirely in Featherston; had so counted on his love for her, wordless though it had been. He had not spoken, indeed, but there had been glances, fond insinuations, loverlike pressures of the hand, delicate gifts of flowers that had convinced her as surely as any spoken testimony of his truth. And now——

That she still believed in him as a man superior to his fellows only added poignancy to her regret. He might have fallen so low as to make ardent love to another man's wife, but still, surely the germs of goodness were in him. With what wonderful ardour he had conducted the crusade against drunkenness in the village, and, indeed, in the country round! He was the foremost leader of the Blue Ribbon movement. How few men of his age would care to associate themselves with an affair of the kind! Old

Lord Killeens was loud in his praise of him. Yes; there was good in him. This she conceded gladly, whilst yet her trust in him (so far as she personally was concerned) died resolutely. She was not the girl to hanker betwixt belief and unbelief. She had gone into it thoroughly, and knew.

To again regard him as a lover, would be impossible to her. To place faith in his pretty subtleties, to let her heart grow warm beneath his glances; oh, never again! She could not trust him; yet a strange pity for him filled her breast at times. This pity grew with thinking, but it was never akin to love. That, beyond all doubt, was at an end. But she still trembled between her old friendship for him and the vague knowledge that he was undeserving even of that. It wanted, indeed, but a light touch to complete his overthrow, and change the pitying friendship to contempt.

It was a bright, an almost oppressively bright afternoon, and on tree, and field, and drooping flowers the sun shone vigorously. The slated roof of The Cottage looked burning hot, and even in the erstwhile cool recesses of the garden, where shade might reasonably be sought, comfort from the noon-tide heat there was none. This Constantia, swinging lazily in her hammock, acknowledged to herself.

The sound of steps upon the garden path roused her from her idle dreaming; and it was with a start and a vivid blush—wild and sweet as a hedge-rose—that she saw Barry and Mr. Stronge bearing down upon her. She was full of life and activity at all times, and now she sprang gracefully to the ground, and confronted them, still with warm, flushed cheeks. Her eyes looked misty and a little dreamy from her waking slumber and her musings amongst the hot blown roses.

To Stronge she looked the very embodiment of flowery youth, and a little pang made sore his heart as he hastened forward to greet her. She placed her hand coldly enough in his, and answered his greeting with her eyes averted. She had been a little shy with him ever since that night of the masked ball that had

wrought so many difficulties all round ; and to Stronge now, her reluctant welcome seemed strangely like aversion. It was, indeed, with an unmistakable air of relief that she turned to the more *débonnaire* Barry, and told him she was glad to see him.

"Aunt Bridget is within," she said hurriedly. "Come in ; you shall see her."

This noble promise failed to raise joy in the breasts that heard. However, perforce they turned, and accompanied Constantia into the dreaded presence.

Miss MacGillicuddy was, as usual, sunk in the depths of gloom. At the weekly Dorcas meeting she had just been insulted by the wife of a neighbouring clergyman, a busy, pretentious little person who gave to her parish a baby every twelve months, and rather more of her opinions than they cared for. There was, however, justification for her in her skirmish with Miss MacGillicuddy, as she might reasonably be supposed to know more of the shape and size of a shirt for a new-born babe than a "benighted spinster," as Mrs. Ratkin somewhat irreverently termed the old lady.

Miss MacGillicuddy, however, stood to her guns. She had *her* theory. She would not believe that a garment of a cut and size so abnormally short could be of use to any human thing. A kitten, she declared, would over-fill it. Mrs. Ratkin did not care for theories. She clung persistently to facts, and demanded triumphantly of Miss MacGillicuddy whether she were or were not a reliable authority as to what a baby could or could not wear.

Miss MacGillicuddy, ignoring the numerous Ratkin babies with a diabolical persistency, as it seemed to the angry mother, declared her unswerving belief that the shirt lying there on the table before them, professing to be a proper pattern, was nothing but a swindle, and entirely useless. Any infant subjected to such clothing would die of cold within a time so short, that Miss MacGillicuddy shrank from naming it.

"You think, then, you know more about it than I do ?" demanded Mrs. Ratkin, rising up in virtuous wrath and surveying her adversary with such angry

eyes that the other members of the meeting felt their pulses throb hopefully. A row was imminent.

"Certainly I do, if you say that that doll's garment there is meant for a human child!" cried Miss MacGillicuddy fiercely.

"You set your opinion above mine?" Mrs. Ratkin was leaning half over the table by this time, a table that had evidently been placed by Providence between them.

"In such a matter—in *most* matters—yes!" declared the spinster undauntedly.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Ratkin. There was a world of venom in the simple ejaculation. "*May I ask if you have ever had a baby?*"

This was the insult. Miss MacGillicuddy retired, smarting under it, though, to do her justice, with colours flying, and with a backward glance that reduced Mrs. Ratkin (who was frightened at what she had said) to tears. It was quite a relief to the still indignant spinster when she beheld Barry enter the drawing-room. Here was a target on which to loose her shafts. She rose to receive the little group of three with an aspect stormy, and suggestive of dangers ahead.

"You!" she said, with a snort, fixing the luckless Barry with a stony stare. When she had sufficiently gorgonised him, she went on to the others. "How d'ye do?" she said to Stronge, of whom she was a little afraid, giving him a bony hand. Then her eyes fell on Constantia. "It is quite a relief to see you at last, Constantia," she said. "I began to think evil had befallen you. What have you been doing with yourself all the afternoon? Philandering, as usual, I suppose. Would it be indiscreet to inquire where these gentlemen met you?"

She fixed a glittering eye on Barry, who was already so frightened that he hardly knew what he was doing.

"It was only this moment, I assure you, that we—I——" he began aimlessly.

"No doubt," said Miss MacGillicuddy sarcastically. "What I ask is, where you found her?"

"In bed," said Barry, with charming simplicity. Then the enormity of his answer struck him, and he grew purple.

"What, sir?" shrieked Miss MacGillicuddy wildly. "Is this a deliberate insult? Is the air full of them to-day? You——"

"Oh, I beg pardon, I'm sure," stammered Barry miserably. His forehead grew damp and red; his eyes became tearful. "It—it was a hammock I meant; but, really, you are so hard on a fellow. You jump upon a fellow so suddenly, that——"

"Sir," interrupted Miss MacGillicuddy, with awful dignity. "A moment! I beg you to understand that never, even in the severest crises of my life, did I jump upon a fellow-creature. You forget yourself, young man!"

She drew a long breath. It became plain to the others that this was only a mild preliminary canter, and that now she was about to launch out into a volley of vituperative abuse that would lay the wretched Barry's head low in the dust. But relief was near. Andrew Stronge, leaning a little forward, caught the irate lady's eye, and by means of a perfectly calm smile and a gentle movement of the right hand, magnetised her so far that he delayed the words already trembling on her lips.

"I know you will be glad to hear," he said genially, "that Lady Varley is looking ever so much better than she did when last I saw her."

"Oh, yes! You have noticed that, too," broke in Constantia, forgetting her shyness of him in her anxiety to back him up and prevent the cascade about to be let loose on Barry.

"I am glad to hear it," said Miss MacGillicuddy. "I trust she is getting into a better frame of mind. To fight against the Divine decrees seems to me to betoken a certain amount of moral depravity." She almost forgot Barry in her eagerness to level abuse on some one else.

Constantia flushed warmly, and rose to her feet.

"You are tired, Aunt Bridget," she said quietly. "We only distress you. I have promised Norah to

take her for a walk this evening, and so, if you will excuse——”

“Take me, too,” whispered Barry, in an imploring tone. Stronge heard it, and brought himself leisurely to his feet.

“Yes, dear Miss MacGillicuddy; I fear we called in an unlucky hour,” he said. “We must only hope we have not done you any harm. Now pray”—going on rapidly, as he saw her open her lips as if to speak, “*I entreat* you to take my advice. A cup of tea for a bad headache, and to lie down. No, not a word; indeed, you must not try to persuade us to stay. A cup of *tea*, remember,” squeezing her hand in farewell, “and an hour’s rest; that is all that is required. Good-bye, good-bye! Now, *do* try my remedies.”

He covered Constantia’s and Barry’s retreat, and presently they found themselves once more in the open air, their numbers augmented by one. Norah had joined them.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

SHOWING HOW CONSTANTIA WENT FOR A WALK, AND HOW SHE GAINED CONSIDERABLE INFORMATION THEREFROM.

“I TRIED to catch you,” cried the child, running panting up to them, “to stop your going in. She is in an awful temper. Some one vexed her at her precious meeting, and she has been prancing round the house ever since. She and Mulcahy had such a set-to just now—all about that little, last wee thimbleful. You remember it, Connie? I’m sure it was such a little one that we never noticed anything about it, until we saw she had her best dress on with the back to the front. But what did that signify, poor old creature? It looked just as well that way on her. And if she preferred it so—I assure you, Mr. Stronge, it was nothing; nothing at all. But then, what could escape Aunt Bridget’s eye?”

"We have, for the moment," said Stronge, taking the little slender hand that was flung out in a tragical disgust, and tucking it under his arm. He knew the child liked him, and by this time she had grown dear to him.

"I expected to find you all in tatters," went on Norah, with an explosive little laugh, "a limb here and a limb there, quite a shower of arms and legs and noses; but I see she has spared you, or else——" She stopped short, and her laughter grew shriller, and so heartfelt that they all joined in. "Did *you* kill *her*?" she cried. "Did you rend her in pieces? If so, expect no tears from me. Oh, what a life she has led me this day!"

"I regret to be obliged to inform you that she still lives to work her wicked will on unoffending people," said Barry gloomily. "We neglected our duty shamefully, I allow, when we left her a while since with the breath still in her body. However, there is a morrow!"

"No," said Norah, shaking her shaggy head; "not a bit of it. 'An opportunity once lost is never to be regained'—that's what Connie wrote in my copy-book yesterday. You've lost your chance!" She shrugged her shoulders as though in contempt of him, and made a little *moue* at Constantia, who was pretending to be angry with her.

"Let Aunt Bridget alone," she said. "Her bark is worse than her bite; and even if it wasn't so, you shouldn't talk like that. I am sorry about poor Mulcahy, though; did she suffer very much at her hands?"

"'Twas a regular shindy," said Norah; "but it grew ever so much worse when Aunt Bridget advised Mulcahy to take Mr. Featherston as her model. He was a high priest of the blessed Blue Ribbon League, she told her, a shining light, a thing apart, and all that sort of stuff—you know, Connie. Mulcahy was very angry about that, and said all sorts of things about Mr. Featherston that enraged Aunt Bridget; but it wasn't until Mulcahy called him a 'say-sarpint' that the end came. She——"

"A what?" demanded Constantia and Stronge in a breath.

"A 'say-sarpint' — that's just what she said. What is it?" asked Norah inquisitively. "Is there a serpent in the sea, Mr. Stronge? At all events, Aunt Bridget won't forgive *that* in a hurry."

They had entered the wood by this time, and the cool and leafy boughs arching above their heads filled them with a certain sense of rest and peace. Through the trees little patches of mossy sward, sun-smitten, lay like tufts of gold; but, for the most part, the hot rays of the dying monarch were excluded, and a light that was almost twilight pervaded everything. It was delicious after the intolerable glare of the more open ground, and they wandered on aimlessly, but full of enjoyment, for some time.

The wood was Featherston's, and, as I have said, it adjoined the fields that encircled The Cottage; to step from them into the dark shadows of the trees was but the work of a moment. The charm of the golden midsummer weather was full upon them, and it was not until a slight glimpse of the house reached her through an avenue of limes that Constantia remembered how far she had come.

She started guiltily, and stopped short upon the little path that would, a few yards farther on, lead to the principal drive.

"How far we have come!" she said, in a quick, dismayed tone — a tone almost frightened, that exercised Stronge's mind not a little; "*too far*. See, there is the house."

"Let us go on to the gardens. It is quite early; there is plenty of time," urged Barry, who believed her reluctance to go farther lay in the thought that she had already over-stayed her hour, and that she would, in his parlance, "catch it" from Miss Mac-Gillicuddy if not home in time. But Stronge knew better, and was more puzzled by her manner than he would confess to himself.

"Oh, no!" said Constantia, stepping back upon the path. "See, how strange it would look to Mr. Featherston to see us taking possession of his place in

this sort of way! If he were at home, he might think——”

“But he isn’t at home,” said Barry. “He’s in Fermanagh. Didn’t you know?”

“No,” said Constantia thoughtfully. And again Stronge felt surprise fill his breast. If Featherston were more to her than any other man, and as Featherston loved her (he was too good a lover himself not to be sure of this latter fact), how did it happen that his movements were so entirely unknown to her? And they such near neighbours, too! It was inexplicable. A lovers’ quarrel, no doubt, he told himself with a suppressed sigh.

“Why, he went on Saturday—three days ago,” said Barry. “Odd you hadn’t heard. He won’t be home until to-morrow. And even so,” with a reproachful glance at her, “you needn’t pretend to me that you think he wouldn’t be glad to see you, at any time, under any circumstances.” Then a light dawned upon him. “Ah! you’re afraid he might object to your being escorted by *me*,” he said, with all the sapient air of one who has grasped by chance a truth.

“Why should he object? What have you got in your head now in lieu of brains?” demanded Constantia, with a stamp of her pretty foot. She knew Stronge was watching her, and this rendered her the more indignant. “I only thought that—— But you are not worth an argument,” she broke off with a nervous little laugh.

“Still, the gardens, Con! And I hear they are lovely now,” entreated Norah coaxingly. She slipped her hand round her sister’s waist, and gazed with tender entreaty into her eyes. “And if he is away from home,” she said.

“Well, let us go, then,” said Constantia. She took Norah’s hand, and held it tightly, and she adroitly changed her position, so that Stronge no longer walked at one side of her. The little sister now divided them. Perhaps she had divined his analysis of her motives a moment since, and resented it. Perhaps his deep, earnest gaze had embarrassed her.

At all events she had elected to punish him, and instinct told her that the surest way to do that was to withdraw herself from him. It was only a yard or two as it happened, but "oh! the difference to him!"

They all went on again, presumably as though nothing had occurred to disturb the happy harmony of a while ago, but silence fell upon them. Even Norah ceased her interminable chatter. Not a word escaped them as they skirted the avenue, and presently emerged upon a low, level bit of sward close to the range of windows that belonged to the library, billiard-room, smoking-room, and the little den where Mr. Featherston was popularly supposed to meditate on godly deeds, to make up his clothing club and other charitable accounts, and where, according to Barry, he was in the habit of saying his prayers.

"It must be awkward for him now," he said, as they came to a standstill opposite the windows of the "Den," to let Norah pluck a flower that had taken her fancy. "He must miss the oratory. But perhaps he sets up his closet wherever he goes. A galvanised iron affair would not cost much, and would be invaluable to one so earnest. He might pitch it on the nearest goose-green, and hold a Blue Ribbon meeting in it. That would delight the innocent villagers; the house that moved would fill them with awe. They would go down before it. His list of teetotallers would be filled to overflowing. He will create quite a sensation in Fer—— Ah!"

The ejaculation dropped from him involuntarily. He changed colour. His gaze was riveted upon the window of the room where the good young man was supposed to wrestle with the higher powers for the subjugation of drunkenness in the village; and lo and behold, what he saw there was the good young man himself!

His companions followed his gaze, and were electrified in turn. To come face to face with a person you have good reason for believing to be many miles away, is always a shock, more or less. It was decidedly more to Constantia in this instance, as she would not have been seen by Featherston so close to his house

for anything that could be offered her. They were all so astounded that no one spoke, even when Featherston had abstracted the paper from the davenport in the window and had moved aside out of their sight. Not for long, however. Before Constantia had sufficiently recovered herself to arrange for a hasty retreat, Featherston reappeared again with a tumbler in his hand.

"The holy boy is going to mix himself a modest seidlitz," Barry could not refrain from muttering, unable to let a chance of sneering at his rival go by.

Featherston had moved away again, and again returned; and what was this he now held?

Constantia gazed as if fascinated at this new object in the picture. She felt she was growing very pale, and that her hands were trembling. Was her last belief in him to be now rudely shattered—here—to-day?

It was a long-necked bottle, of goodly proportions. By no means an empty bottle. It was three-quarters full of a liquid of a pale gold colour. It seemed to those looking on that they could, even at that distance, read the word *Cognac* upon it.

Mr. Featherston, who evidently ignored the superior charms of a decanter, eyed the ordinary brandy bottle with a friendly glance, and pulling the cork from it, proceeded to pour its contents into the tumbler until the latter was quite half full—generous measurement allowed. To lift it to his lips after this, and drink it with an unmistakable relish, seemed a simple matter to this apostle of temperance! Who ran could read that there was a lasting love between the man and the bottle.

"Come, come," whispered Constantia hoarsely, turning piteous eyes on Stronge. It seemed to him—who understood a great deal, and yet not quite all—a marvellously strange thing that it should be to *him* she came for help in this trial, which, after all, had he but known it, was not so severe a one. It was, however, the final wrench.

She put out her hand to him in her distress. He caught it—how gladly, she could not know—

and with one consent, they all turned and fled the spot, and ran back towards the wood. In silence they made their way, until they came to a tiny dell, secluded, moss-grown, living in the very heart of the swaying trees; and here they stopped, out of breath a little, and looked one upon the other. No one spoke.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

SHOWING HOW A GIRLISH ILLUSION WAS FINALLY DESTROYED,
AND HOW STRONGE FAILED TO SEE IT.

WHEN the silence had grown positively awful, Norah broke it.

"Well, I never!" she said, simply, but largely.

Neither did any one else, evidently. There was no dissentient voice. One could see that they were somewhat embarrassed with each other, by the way in which they avoided each other's eyes. Constantia tried to make a remark, but failed; so did Stronge; and then all at once they became aware that something was the matter with Barry.

He was purple! He was writhing, wriggling, in the most extraordinary way, and then the crisis came. He burst into a roar of laughter.

Long and loud he laughed, with a most indecent disregard for public opinion. He was past caring for that. He flung himself indeed upon the mossy sward as though he could no longer support his limbs, and abandoned himself ecstatically to the mirth that had been consuming him for the last five minutes.

Stronge regarded him with extreme severity for a little while, and then, overcome no doubt by his evil example, gave in, and broke into exuberant laughter likewise. Even the fear of Constantia's wrath was powerless to control him. Norah was not long in following suit. Delighted with a chance

of cackling at all times, she saw now a splendid opportunity not to be neglected, and gave her mirth full swing without a thought for the morrow, and a sister's displeasure.

As for Constantia, she stood stern and uncompromising, gazing at her companions with careful contempt. But after a bit her strength, she found, was insufficient for her. Had this revelation come a month ago, before the disclosures on the night of that fatal masked ball, all would have been different; believing Featherston still true, she would have felt crushed, humiliated, heart-broken. But *now*!

Now they were all laughing; and she was young, she was Irish, she was pretty. It was but a flesh-wound, after all, she had received in her first encounter. In spite of a keen struggle with her severer self, the stern lines about her soft lips relaxed, the gravity died from her eyes, and was replaced by a sparkling light that told its own tale. She made one last fight for composure, and then, vanquished, yet without regret for her defeat, she joined in the general merriment, and laughed until the tears ran down her cheeks.

"That's right," said Stronge, with a quick sense of relief as he watched her. Was there a glimmer of hope in the relief?

"Oh, but——" she said, looking up at him. "It is dreadful, is it not? Oh, we should not be laughing——"

"After all, why not?" said Stronge. "There is an element of comicality somewhere around, and we are all infected by it. There is surely no harm in that."

"Garrett, he is calling you names," said Norah saucily. "He says you are a comical element. It was you who made us laugh, wasn't it?"

"Well, I don't fancy I was the first cause," said Barry. "I was only the useful but insignificant match. Better be laughing than crying, any day. Featherston ought to do the crying, naughty boy! By Jove, what a swindle!" Here he went off again.

"I wish we hadn't gone up there to-day," said Constantia nervously. "You must confess we behaved

meanly, shamefully, to spy upon him through his own windows, to detect him——”

“Drinking whisky, with that blue ribbon pinned upon his coat! That’s what *I* call mean and shameful,” interrupted Norah, with a little sniff.

“Brandy, my dear,” corrected Barry. “Don’t belie him.”

“Was it brandy? Really?” asked Norah, in an awe-struck tone.

“The best, I have no doubt,” said Barry.

“That makes it worse, then,” said Norah. “Aunt Bridget is always saying that brandy is ever so much wickedder than whisky.”

“Your Aunt Bridget knows what’s what,” returned Barry solemnly. “Take my advice, and stick to her dark sayings until your hair is gray.”

“Oh, I hope he didn’t see us,” said Constantia miserably. She looked so pale and terrified that once again Stronge’s heart was contracted by a bitter pang of jealousy. Once again despair took up its dwelling there. Women, he knew, had been faithful through much before Constantia’s time—perhaps she would be! He was ignorant, however, of that little scene at Donna Dundas’s ball, where masks hid faces, and where hearts spoke the truth. A woman can forgive most things, but disloyalty demands vengeance.

“To do him justice he doesn’t squint, and it would have been impossible otherwise to see us and the bottle at the same time,” said Barry, who was determined not to take it seriously. “He gave the preference to the bottle.” Then he looked amused again. “If he had seen us, I wonder what he would have done,” he said.

“Prayed for death,” said Stronge with conviction.

“Oh, when I think of that blue ribbon!” cried Norah indignantly. “And it was the biggest bit of ribbon in the parish. Oh, the hypocrite! Connie, how shall we ever speak to him again?”

“You must do nothing, you must not even hint at it. It would be base, dishonourable,” said Constantia vehemently. “Norah, do you hear me?”

You must do *nothing*, you must let this thing pass from your mind as though it had never been."

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Norah scornfully, who had not yet learned that you may think in any uncivilised language you like, but that you must speak in proper English. "Do you suppose I could forget what we saw to-day? Could *you*?"

Constantia turned a sorrowful glance upon her little sister, but answer she made none. Never indeed would she forget this day. Her last belief in one she could have loved was shattered, the pity had given place to-day to a supreme contempt. But in all this there was sadness.

"It never occurred to me," said Stronge slowly.

"It did to me," said Barry. "I'm a dull fellow enough, but some instinct stood to me, and told me to mistrust him. This craze for total abstinence was all a plant to get himself into the good graces of Lord Killeens, who can give him a push in the parliamentary direction next election. Bah! it makes one sick to think of it."

"Come home!" said Constantia suddenly. She looked distressed, and her hands were trembling. A thought had come to her. "If he should happen to walk this way—to meet us. It *might* happen." She did not say how often of late he had come through the wood this way to call at The Cottage, and how often she had rushed by the back door into the tiny orchard behind the house to give some colour to the servant's answer, "Not at home." "Oh, hurry!" she cried, looking appealingly at Stronge. "If I met him now I could not speak to him—I couldn't indeed, and he might guess——"

Her very lips grew pale at the dreadful thought. Barry sprang to his feet, and they all followed Connie's eager footsteps back towards The Cottage. Just where the wood terminated, and the open fields began that belonged to her home, she dismissed her companions.

"Norah and I will go home alone the rest of the way: Yes, please," seeing that Barry was about to protest, the hour being late and the twilight

dull. "As you know," with a faint smile at him, "Aunt Bridget is not altogether in her loveliest mood to-day, and to see you again—you both," hastily including Stronge, and blushing warmly at her indiscretion, "would—would——"

"Don't mind me," said Barry sweetly, "I'm not worth that blush; nor is the occasion. To know one's self unbeloved by Miss MacGillicuddy might cause some men acute misery; it only causes me joy unspeakable. However, as I am your servant always, Constantia, to do or die in your service, I shall bid you good-bye here."

"Don't take things so much to heart," said Stronge, in a low voice, as he took her hand in parting. "Nothing is worth much grief!"

Yet, how *he* had grieved! How he would grieve for ever for the love denied him! He put aside his own feelings for the moment, and spoke this worldly sentiment to try to heal her wound. He was considerably perplexed by the strange look with which she answered him.

"Is that your creed?" she said slowly.

"At least it is a good one," he returned evasively.

He and Barry, having kissed good-night to Norah, turned into a path that led sharply to the right and were soon out of sight. Constantia, with a quick sigh, went on through the wood, hardly heeding the lively Norah's chatter that never for a moment ceased. Towards the end of the path a thick bit of shrubbery grew, and as they entered it, both started as a tall, dark figure stepped out of the rhododendrons, right in front of them.

CHAPTER XL.

SHOWING HOW A TERRIBLE TRUTH WAS LAID BARE TO
CONSTANTIA.

CONSTANTIA shrank back involuntarily as if frightened, and laid her hand on Norah's arm. That little heroine, however, was not to be daunted. She went straight up to the dark figure, and peered into its face.

"Why, it's Kitty!" she said then, in a tone of distinct disappointment; a tone that bordered on disgust; to be so near to the finding of a real bogey, and to have it turn out nothing after all! "What are you doing here, Kitty?" she demanded, with an air of asperity.

A face had emerged from the long black cloak that Irish married women always wear; a face young and pretty. One could see that the cloak had been borrowed. The girl looked past Norah at Constantia, in a timid, uncertain fashion.

"Miss Connie," she said, "could I spake to ye for a moment, if ye plaze?"

The cloak had fallen back altogether now, and betrayed the dove-coloured cachemire gown and muslin apron that formed the female livery at Araglin. Constantia saw that it was Kitty Brian, the under-housemaid there, a girl to whom Lady Varley had been specially kind, taking her out of a poverty-stricken cabin to train as a servant. The girl had returned this kindness by a passionate attachment, that grew with every gentle word from her gentle mistress.

"Lady Varley!" exclaimed Constantia anxiously. "She is not ill? Has anything happened?"

"There is nothing, miss," said the girl, "nothing at all," with a rather forced smile. Her nervousness seemed to grow upon her. "It was only a little thrille of my own I wanted to—to consult ye about. An' I thought if I met ye here in private," with an

expressive glance at Norah (who read her, however, like a book), "you might listen to me."

"Certainly," said Constantia gravely. "Norah, run on to the house, and if Aunt Bridget asks for me say—say I am coming, and that I shall be in presently."

"I'll do better than that," said the good little Norah. "I'll idle around until I see you coming, or," fearing she may hurry her, "*nearly* coming, and then she can scold us both together, which," saucily, "will save time. Now, Kitty," with a scornful glance at that poor diplomatist, "you can tell your secrets in comfort, as you have got rid of me."

She darted away like a swallow, leaving Constantia alone with the maid.

"Well," said the former, smiling kindly, "what is it? You have something to say to me?"

She liked the girl, who had proved herself very devoted to Lady Varley during all the sad time of the poor little baby's illness and death, and prepared to listen sympathetically to any homely tale of trouble the girl might chance to tell.

"Yes, miss." The girl hesitated, and looked round her fearfully, and Constantia, whose surprise was growing, could not fail to mark the pallor of her lips, and the terror that depicted itself on every feature.

"There is bad news, Miss Connie," she said at last; and then again paused, with a swift glance around her into the thickening gloom. "Oh, if I should be overheard!" she said.

"No one can hear you in this out-of-the-way spot," returned Constantia calmly, though her heart was beginning to beat with the expectation of some unknown but surely coming evil. "What is it, Kitty? Speak at once. Something has happened."

"No, no, miss; not yet. But—but what I'm afraid of is that it *will* happen unless there is some one to prevent it. Miss Connie," in a low, urgent tone, "swear to me you'll not betray that I was the one to spake, of what I'm now goin' to tell ye."

"I swear it," said Constantia, without hesitation.

And then quickly, "Lady Varley is in danger—trouble?"

"Ay, miss. 'Twill be sad throuble for her if no one can help. But you, Miss MacGillicuddy, you can do something. That's why I came to ye. For two long days and nights," cried the girl, in low but excited tones, "this secret has lain upon my heart, until I told myself I should spake of it or die."

"Speak, then," said Constantia, with a touch of impatience; "what is this terrible thing that threatens your mistress?"

"My lord——" began the girl, and then stopped abruptly as if frightened.

Constantia drew back. She flushed crimson.

"It is impossible that I should listen to complaints of Lord Varley," she said haughtily. "I thought you too respectable a girl for this sort of thing. Do you think your mistress would like to have the petty unpleasantnesses of her household publicly canvassed?"

She moved as though to pass the girl by; but Kitty Brian laid her hand upon her arm and held her firmly.

"Miss Constance, don't go like that. Hear me," she cried, dropping on her knees and catching Constantia's skirts. "You know—don't ye, now, miss?—that I would sell my heart's blood for the mistress. 'Tis for my lady that I beg, here on my knees. I thought you loved her, so I came to you. Oh, miss, if *you* will not listen, who will? What friend has she upon earth when—her own man is false to her?"

The voice was so tragical, so passionately in earnest, the girl's face so white with honest emotion, that Constantia felt her nerve fail her. Oh, if any real misfortune threatened Lady Varley, what should she do? She entertained for her so warm an affection that she stood now almost paralysed by this sudden baleful light that had been thrown across her brain. That Lord Varley had been wild, foolish, culpable, she knew; but that word "false," and the girl's impassioned manner——

"Do you know what you are saying?" she murmured faintly.

"Ay, miss; and the grief that lies in my words for her. God be good to us all! We want it sorely when the very closest to us may be the one to work us the worst evil!"

"All that you say makes only vague hints," cried Constantia vehemently. "You must explain fully, entirely. Tell me at once exactly what you mean."

"Listen, then, miss. Ye heard, maybe, that Mither Dundas went to London about a week ago?"

"Yes."

"Maybe, though, ye haven't heard that ever since his goin', my lord has been mornin', noon, an' night up there at Ballymore wid Mrs. Dundas?"

"This is all probably idle gossip."

"It's not, miss!" with an eloquent gesture. "Don't ye be led from the truth by such rubbish as that. He goes to see Mrs. Dundas. More shame for her!" she broke out, in a burst of honest indignation.

"He may have had business," persisted Constantia. But she felt her feebleness.

"Business, is it? An' what business has he wid any one but his own wife? Arrah! Miss Connie, now, an' is it defendin' him ye'd be? An' I that could have sworn ye were all for my lady!"

"If you have only to tell me of Lord Varley's visits to Mrs. Dundas, who is a very old friend of his," began Constantia coldly, "I——"

"Ah! but that isn't all, miss," said the girl sadly. "'Tis only the beginnin' of it. Look here; this is how it stands. Mr. Dundas has been gone a week; he is not to be home for another fortnight, an' when he comes he won't find a wife before him. She's goin' to leave him for Lord Varley!"

"Oh, no, no! What horrible story is this?" cried Constantia, putting up her hands as if to ward off some hateful thing.

"'Tis thrue, miss, for all that," said the girl mournfully. "Thru as ye stand there. This is

Tuesday, an' for Thursday they have it all settled to run away." She threw her arms wide, and then suddenly brought her hands together with a loud clap, and burst into tears. "Oh, wirra, wirra! an' what will become of my lady thin?" she sobbed frantically.

Constantia was too horrified to have much patience with her wild grief.

"Stop crying," she said imperiously, "and listen to me. Have you proofs? Is there no doubt about all this—disgraceful story?"

"Sorra doubt, miss." The girl was still sobbing, but some indignation came into her tone. She turned on Constantia. "D'ye think I wouldn't have more dacency than to mintion the matther at all, if there wasn't a necessity for it?" she said. "It's all arranged, I tell ye. By starting on Thursday, they'll have a good run before Mr. Dundas has learned the truth. Oh, it will be the ruin entirely of my lady! Such a shame to her, an' before all the world, too! Oh, miss, if you can do anything, do it!"

Constantia was sunk in thought. So this was the end of Donna's wiles! An intense loathing for her beautiful cousin, that seemed to chill her through and through, crept over her until she felt that she was shivering, not only in soul but body. Oh, the pretty phrases of her, the plausible words, the soft, seductive laugh! Oh, that she could tell her what she thought of her! That she could make her feel, if only for the first and last time of her life!

She drew her breath hard with a kind of sob, as she again turned to the anxious girl.

"And you," she said, looking down on her, "how did you learn all this?"

Kitty fidgeted.

"Why, there's Dinny Murphy up at Ballymore," she said at last.

"I see. I understand. He is your sweetheart—your lover?"

"Why, we do be keepin' company sometimes,"

said the girl, plucking shyly at her apron. "But faix, I don't think, miss, that there's much in it."

She cast a glance at Constantia out of her eloquent Irish eyes, as she said this, that belied her assertion, and compelled Constantia to believe that there was all the world in it so far as she was concerned.

"Maybe ye think I should have held my tongue in spite of what I know. Maybe 'tis blamin' me ye are for spakin' at all," she said presently, puzzled by Constantia's pained silence. "But fegs, miss, dear, I couldn't see the misthress worsted widout sayin' a word to somebody who might give her a hand. An' by luck, miss, it sthruke me that you were the very one to do her a good turn. Miss Connie," she came closer and took Constantia's hand, and lifted it respectfully, and pressed it to her lips, "do *something*. Do now! I'm a poor, ignorant girl, an' no one would listen to me, or I'd stand up before Father Jerry himself, an' cry it through the parish as a sin an' a shame, if I thought 'twould do any good to my lady. Oh, miss! to see the face of her, so sad, an' so lonely, as if all the world was asthray wid her! If even the baby had been left her——"

Here she broke off and began to cry bitterly. The little child had been very dear to her. Many and many an hour she had walked up and down the nursery floor at midnight, hushing its weak cries, and soothing it into the lethargy that often passed for sleep.

"Do not think of that, do not go back to it," cried Constantia hurriedly, a pang at her heart. "I will try what I can do, I promise you; and I am glad, Kitty, that you came to me—me only. No one"—she leaned forward impressively, and laid her hand on the girl's shoulder—"no one, remember, must know of this but you and I. Think of Lady Varley!"

"I think of nothing else, miss," replied the girl sadly.

CHAPTER XLI.

SHOWING HOW TWO RIVALS MET AND CAME TO MANY WORDS.

THE next morning broke so clear and bright that one might readily believe such a story as Kitty's could have nothing to do with an earth so beauteous as that which it illumined. The sun shone brilliantly, its merry rays darting from glade to glade. The perfume of the flowers burdened the air. There was a touch of light-hearted gaiety, sweet as it was innocent, in all great Nature's works.

It was close on noon—a sultry, delicious noon—as Featherston walked down the road that led to The Cottage. His brows were bent, and there was a settled look of determination on his well-bred face. His handsome nose was full of purpose, and his mouth, a feature rather difficult to read, as a rule, was compressed. Three times of late Constantia had denied herself to him—he felt as sure she was in the house on those three occasions as though he had seen her—but to-day he told himself he was not to be baffled by any subterfuge of girl's invention.

See her he would. He believed so far in himself that he felt he was capable of doing away with the bad impression he had made upon her on that luckless evening at Ballymore. By-the-bye, he was in Mrs. Dundas's debt for that, and he thought he now saw a means of repaying her. He laughed quite gaily to himself, as he walked along whisking the pretty heads off the tall marguerites that lined the roadway, as he called to mind a little conversation he had yesterday with Dinny Murphy, groom at Ballymore, whose father was a tenant of his. Even the memory of the two sovereigns wasted on that occasion did not take the edge off his mirth. Wasted?—no!

But as for Constantia, he hardly knew till lately how his very soul was set on the gaining of that girl. Her coldness, her studied avoidance only heated his desire for her a thousandfold. That absurd infatua-

tion of a moment for that red-haired traitress—what was it compared with the lasting passion he entertained for this girl who of late had seemed to flout him? The eyes that once smiled on him were averted now; the lips no longer laughed. The happy, girlish voice was grave and constrained when by chance she met with him. But all this surely told but the one tale: that she still loved him! A cloud had fallen upon her affection and saddened it, but it only remained for him to speak—to explain—to plead with her in those low, seductive tones that were wont to fill her lovely face with gentle joy, and once again she would be his in heart, in mind.

His step grew eager. He abominated the dusty road, but he had had to attend a small committee of Blue Ribbonites in the “Parochial Hall” of the village, as the aborigines called it, delighting to honour it in this wise, though in truth it was the dingiest of bare stone houses, with draughts rushing wildly through it, by reason of the fact that the little boys in the town above could not resist making “cock-shots” of the windows whenever the police (who were amiable) were out of the way. Featherston had walked from this palace of delight on the straight and stony road that led to the dwelling of Miss MacGillicuddy. His mind was made up. He would to-day bring himself face to face with Constantia, no matter what difficulties beset his path, and lay at her feet his name, his fortune, and—himself! The last in capitals.

He began to picture to himself her joy, her pride, when he at last owned himself captive to her spear. How her lovely eyes would dilate, then lower themselves; her colour come and go! She would lay her hand confidingly in his, and secretly promise to her own heart “to love, honour, and obey”—*obey!* good, wise, conservative old word—until her life’s end. Pretty Constantia! A wife to rule, to manage, to—to blind occasionally; in fact, the one woman in the world for him. A dear, unsophisticated little thing; a veritable rustic maiden, with, however, good blood in her veins, who would believe all things where he was concerned, and only call her soul her own

when it agreed in thought with his. He could almost see her, he told himself—in a fanciful vision that was perfect in every detail—as she would surely look when he took her in his arms, and told her that, after long deliberation, it was really—*really* she, and no other, he had elected to take as his companion and comforter through life.

Dear little Constantia! How pleased she would be! All remembrance of that absurd fiasco on the night of the masked ball (which was an invention of the evil one and Mrs. Dundas combined) would be obliterated from her mind in one sweep, as it were, when this happy arrangement of his was made known to her. To be *his* wife! Yes; that would square everything.

He was full of these modest musings when he was rudely startled by the quick springing of a tall figure from the wall on his right hand on to the road.

“Whither away, old chap?” demanded Garrett Barry blithely, as he reached his side. There was a touch of something that might be termed contempt in the gaiety of his manner. He laughed as his eye caught Featherston’s, as if at some hidden recollection, mirthful, but hardly creditable; and altogether there was a want of respect in his bearing, the respect that one honest man always owes to another.

“I am going to The Cottage, to see Miss Mac-Gillicuddy,” returned Featherston, in his starchiest tone.

“Ah! and are you, now?” said Barry lightly, *too* lightly. “To wish her the top of the morning, eh?”

“I always think it such an extreme pity, my dear Barry,” returned Mr. Featherston, “that you persist in trying to make people believe you the terrible Irishman whom England has created. It has quite died out now, I assure you, and you will interest nobody in that rôle”—“or in any other,” he would have dearly liked to say, but the Limerick man, he was aware, could make himself unpleasant at times. “The *typical* Irishman, I think, is what they call it. English novels have produced a good many of them. They are extremely strange beings, and one wonders

who first invented them. But the illustrious author's name has not transpired."

"To hear you talk is a liberal education," said Barry, glancing at him with undisguised admiration. "How you beguile the way! To a rackety fellow like me you can't think what an amount of moral good it does to be permitted to listen to the words of wisdom that drop from the lips of a really earnest, conscientious liver such as you. So many of your so-called honest Christians are such hypocrites; but you! There is something delightful in the knowledge that there is no sham about *you*."

Mr. Featherston cast a swift glance at his companion out of the corner of his eye, but Barry looked so mild, so harmless, that he believed in him.

"Ah, well, you mustn't rate me too highly," he said, with a benignant smile.

Barry burst out laughing. Really, the fellow was too much for anybody. There was derision in the laugh, and Featherston's face changed.

"I won't," said Barry, with a meaning nod. "I'll oblige you there. Perhaps it would be impossible, eh?" He laughed again. "Well, a truce to personalities," he said. "It is occasionally pleasanter to talk of a third person. Honour bright, now, what's taking you to The Cottage to-day?"

He asked this crude question with such astounding assurance that for a second Featherston was a little taken aback. Then he rallied.

"An odd question!" he said. "And you will permit me to say that I cannot see that it is any affair of yours."

"Your sight wants mending, then. 'Tis all my own affair, every bit of it. The fact is, I don't want your company at The Cottage to-day. I have something to say to—to—Miss Constantia that doesn't require an audience."

"What?" exclaimed Featherston involuntarily. He flushed a dark red, and a heavy frown settled on his forehead. Lovers' ears are sharp to hear and to comprehend, and Barry's words conveyed their correct meaning to him. Was this great blundering brute,

then, bound on the same errand as himself? Good heavens, what an astonishing piece of impertinence! It almost took the flavour out of the anticipated pleasure of Constantia's blushing acceptance of his own proposal.

"What can you have to say to Miss MacGillicuddy that all the world might not hear?" he said, with ill-concealed contempt.

"What you can't say for me, any way," returned Barry good-humouredly (he had plenty of reason for his good-humour); "though perhaps you might have no objection to say it for yourself, eh?" He peered into the other's face, which was growing from red to crimson. "'Pon my soul, I've hit it!" he cried, bringing his large hand down upon Featherston's back with a resounding bang. "So that's your game, is it? Well, if I were you, old man, I think I'd turn home again."

"Let me pass, sir!" said Featherston, boiling with indignation. "What are your innuendoes worth to me? An unsuccessful rival is necessarily ill-tempered, so your remarks I pass over. Miss MacGillicuddy's taste is too refined to permit of her ever acknowledging you as a suitor. Save yourself, I entreat you, an annoying half-hour with her, and go back to where you came from."

"It wasn't from a temperance meeting, consisting of a few old women, at all events," said Barry, with a scornful laugh. "Go back, is it? Will I, though? To leave the course clear for you, maybe? Not likely, dear boy! Where thou goest, I will go; for this afternoon, at all events. Not that I stand a chance next to *you*!" Here again that curious suspicion of disrespectful hilarity came into full play, and enlarged the corners of his mouth. "The good young man has always the pull over we others; but the good young man with an azure ribbon glued to his coat smashes up the lot. Constantia will think a good deal about that blue ribbon," he said. "Be sure you put it prominently forward."

There was something about his manner that

Featherston found strange, and not altogether satisfactory. It was a trouble to him, because a puzzle.

"I shall not seek to purchase Miss MacGillicuddy's favour," he said loftily. "I shall trust to my own merits."

"You admit, then, that you are about to seek her favour," said Barry. "Well, *I* should be the last to wonder at that. It is the best gift the world holds, in my opinion; and he who wins it will be a king above his fellows. You see, I am candid with you. To make her my wife is the dearest wish of my heart. That is more than you dare to say openly before making trial of your skill."

"You are wrong there," said Featherston quickly, goaded by the other into a spoken declaration of his errand. "I have quite decided upon making Miss MacGillicuddy my wife. I, of course, regret the fact that you should have had the folly to set your heart upon her, but I cannot, for that reason, resign my purpose."

"You feel no fear, no misgiving?" said Barry.

"True love always fears," returned Featherston sententiously, with an attempt at sentiment that made Barry long to kick him; "but there are circumstances—there are, in fact—ahem—reasons—why I dare hope all things, so far as Miss MacGillicuddy is concerned. Not that I deserve anything at her hands."

The affectation of humility that marked this last remark drove Barry to the very limit of his patience. He had, however, a certain knowledge that enabled him to restrain himself.

"Don't run yourself down," he said. "You are really too good. Such modesty is very unusual."

"As matters stand thus between Miss MacGillicuddy and me," went on Featherston, in his smooth, unmoved tones, "I should advise you to let me proceed alone to The Cottage to-day."

"And why, now?" said Barry. "If you are so confident of success as you declare yourself, what harm can it do you if I, too, throw myself at her

feet? Indeed, as you are so sure, you may as well let me try my fortune first."

"No; I shall not submit to that," exclaimed Featherston hastily. A sudden and very real fear took possession of him. What if Constantia, in a moment of pique, remembering the wrong he had done her, and thinking perhaps that he had no intention of coming forward and declaring himself desirous of making her his wife, should foolishly give way and engage herself to Barry! There was madness in this thought. No; he would not risk it. "I left home this morning with a fixed determination," he said. "I see no reason why I should now abandon it."

"You mean to be first in the field?" said Barry hotly.

"Certainly"

"In spite of your 'reasons' for being sure of a kindly hearing, and the fact that the foe is so weak as you would make me out to be?"

"I decline to discuss the matter with you," said Featherston wisely, seeing Barry's eyes ablaze.

"You'll have to, yet, let me tell you," said Barry grimly, "though not at the present moment, as I should like to present myself to Constantia, on this day of all others, in decorous clothing." There was a good deal of meaning in this speech, and Featherston began to wish honestly that he had not met him. "I, too, am determined to be first."

"We both can't be," said Featherston. "One of us, therefore, had better give in."

"For once we agree. Let that one be you."

"Never."

"Never for me, too," said Barry defiantly. He turned, and began to walk swiftly in the direction of The Cottage. Featherston, after a sharp battle with his dignity, turned after him; and then commenced a walking-match that lasted for a good half-mile.

"This is absurd," cried Featherston at last. "We cannot both rush into Miss MacGillicuddy's presence and declare ourselves."

"Certainly not; but one of us can," retorted Barry, hastening on again as though his very life depended on his speed.

"You must be mad to behave like this!" cried Featherston furiously.

"Not a bit of it," returned Barry, still pounding along the road at about twenty knots an hour.

Featherston laid his hand on his arm and swung him sharply round.

"Don't be a fool," he said. "Don't you see you will only damage your cause—if cause there be. I shall prevent your speaking to her with any effect *this* evening, and to-morrow will be mine."

"No," said Barry. "Mine. If I sit up all night on the garden wall of Constantia's house, you shan't see her alone."

"That's good enough for one morrow, but how for the rest? Can you keep watch and ward for ever?"

"I'm an idle man," said Barry tranquilly. "It will give quite a zest to my life to become your guardian. And, believe me, I'll keep you as the apple of my eye."

"Let us come to some arrangement," said Featherston impatiently.

At this moment the sound of footsteps behind them became audible.

CHAPTER XLII.

SHOWING HOW THEY BOTH MARCHED TO THEIR DESTRUCTION; AND HOW THEY INDUCED A FRIEND TO ACCOMPANY THEM.

It was Stronge. Barry hailed him with a delight that was rather malignant.

"Thrice welcome!" he cried buoyantly. "You shall be umpire betwixt we two." Featherston made a movement as if to check him, but Barry waved him off. "Here is Featherston——"

"I beg——" began Featherston indignantly.

"——And here am I, both bent on laying our homage at Miss Constantia's feet. There is a hitch, however, in the programme. We each regard the other as so fascinating, that we dread to resign the *premier* move. Come, help us out of our difficulty, Stronge; we look to you to solve the problem."

Stronge took his cigar from his mouth, and made a paltry pretence of flicking the ash from it—an ash that wasn't there; it lay somewhere on the ground a dozen yards away. He changed colour perceptibly, and for the instant felt that speech would be a trouble to him. What a farce was this! He felt he should rather have given way to laughter than to this strange sensation of angry pain that seemed to numb his very heart-strings, when he compelled himself to recognise the fact that not one but three suitors were on their way to Constantia. Once again, in spite of all discouragement, he had started forth to entreat her grace—more, perhaps, with a desire to put even a fuller stop to the written page, than from any hope of gain. And now, here was Featherston bound on the same errand—Featherston, who had been her first fancy; and though he had sinned, yet what is there that a woman will not forgive to the man she loves? He felt suddenly that he was tired, and that he was growing old.

To the other two, however, his emotion was unknown, so wrapt were they in the war that still raged between them.

"I don't know what you mean, sir, by this—this unwarrantable behaviour," exclaimed Featherston savagely. "Is Miss MacGillicuddy's name to be dragged into the conversation for the benefit of every chance passer-by? I decline positively to——"

"To adhere to what you said just now?" demanded Barry, with a sneer. "Are you ashamed, then, of your protestations? Is your passion cooling? Will you deny to Stronge that you were on your way to make a formal proposal for Miss MacGillicuddy's hand? Come, now! Will you give the lie to that?"

Stronge could see that Barry was in one of his wildest moods—a mood that no law of society would be strong enough to quell.

Featherston hesitated.

"You will?" cried Barry derisively. "Stand aside, then, O recreant knight, and lower your colours! So, with all your boasted certainty of being accepted, you yet shrink from proclaiming your love?"

"I shrink from nothing," said Featherston, whose face had taken a very ugly expression. He felt himself pressed, *compelled* to declare his purpose openly, and to this fellow Stronge of all others, for whom he had ever entertained a settled antipathy. He resented the calm air of the man, an air that belonged of right only to the aristocratic classes, and that should have been unknown to this beggarly blanket fellow. He resented, too, the honest, unflinching integrity of the *parvenu*, and he resented now most of all, and bitterly, the steady, scrutinising gaze that Stronge bent upon him out of his clear eyes. They dragged, as it were, the truth, even from *him*.

"Why should I shrink from acknowledging that Miss MacGillicuddy is to me the one perfect woman in existence," he said, putting a bold face upon it, and piling up the sentiment with a view to erasing all memory of his hesitation of a moment since,

"and that I shall consider it an honour to be permitted to approach her as a suitor for her hand?" He said this with an assumption of dignity that was but poorly played.

Barry looked at Stronge and burst out laughing. A wild, ironical laugh. Stronge, however, for his part, looked singularly grave.

"You are right," he said, looking direct at Featherston, with a terribly searching gaze. "She is a creature singularly perfect. To approach her requires courage, and—a pure conscience."

He had forgotten himself altogether. And, after all, whose conscience is entirely pure? Are we gods? But he *did* think of the living lie that Featherston's life was, and he fought in the dark for Constantia.

"Here lies the gist of the whole thing," cried Barry, breaking into the awkward silence. "We both desire to try our fate with the woman we love, and, unfortunately, have chosen the same day for the trial. Who shall give precedence to the other? That is the question. It is a comedy, almost a farce—it *may* rise to a tragedy!" He laughed lightly, but with meaning. "Come, advise us, Stronge."

"That is the last thing I should dream of doing," replied Stronge quietly. "You must pardon me, Barry, if I decline to interfere in this matter. It is out of my province altogether."

"Give us the benefit of your common sense, at all events," said Barry, who could see that Featherston writhed beneath every word that was addressed to Stronge. "We know that to be above praise. The fact that you are a confirmed bachelor, and that even such a girl as Constantia MacGillicuddy can be passed by on the other side by you, makes you a competent umpire."

He spoke in a bantering tone meant to incense Featherston, but every word fell heavy on Stronge's heart. *He* indifferent to Constantia? *He* a fit umpire? He drew his breath sharply.

"It is impossible that I should judge between you," he said coldly. Then suddenly his expression

changed, and he looked wrathfully at Barry. "This is a very unseemly dispute," he said. "Give it up, it is unworthy of you."

"Give it up? Give it up to him? Not if I gained the world by it," said Barry. "I have pledged myself to it now, and I'll carry it through whatever the end may be."

It was evident to Stronge that the wild, fierce blood in him had broken loose; his eyes flashed, there was a cruel sense of enjoyment in his excitement.

"He is so sure, so certain, let him give me a chance."

"*You* are nothing to me," said Featherston haughtily. "My word, pledged to myself, is much. I have arranged to see Miss MacGillicuddy to-day, and such as you shall not deter me."

"Pshaw! We all know what that means," said Barry contemptuously. "Well, look here, you spoke of an arrangement a while since; I give in to that. Let's toss for it."

Featherston was silent for a while. The proposal, made as it was, had an element of hope in it. Some spirit whispered to him that surely he would be the victor in this game of chance, and to win would be to rid himself of this troublesome brute for ever.

He had grown almost superstitious about the necessity of seeing Constantia to-day and putting her affection to the test. He had no fear of the result if he were given time to explain away certain compromising matters; but as it was he felt he should have the first word. If it hadn't been for that unfortunate mistake at the masked ball he would willingly have let Barry go to his destruction, knowing that she would refuse him; but just now, with a sense of injury full upon her, it was impossible to know what she might do even though her heart might be—nay, certainly *was*—his, Featherston's. Of that he had no doubt at all.

As for this game of chance, why should he hesitate about it? Luck was on his side beyond doubt—

he knew, he felt it. Should he accede to Barry's wild proposition it would be to his rival's downfall, not to his. A sense of exultation fired his breast. His heart rose within him. But true to his rôle of good young man, he pretended a mild horror of such a scandalous proceeding as tossing on a public road.

"What! Here!" he said, in a tone of pious alarm. "Consider——"

"The lilies of virtue," put in Barry with a peculiar smile, finishing a supposititious sentence for him. "If it offends your tender morals," he said, "to sin before the world, by all means let us wink at your doing it in secret. The leafy recesses of your own woods hold out to us a helping hand, let us enter them and there perpetrate the deed of darkness."

"So be it," said Featherston calmly. He was determined he would not be offended by anything this man could say. A stile led from the road into this part of the wood that was quite close to the grounds of The Cottage, and he stepped lightly over it to the grass beyond. Barry, while following him, looked back at Stronge.

"You will come, too," he said.

"No; there is really no necessity," Stronge was beginning when Featherston interrupted him.

"Every necessity," he said strongly, with an insulting glance at Barry; "there should be a third person to see fair play." In reality he was afraid to go with Barry alone into the silent wood.

"You mean that for me," said Barry softly.

"For you," returned Featherston.

"Other matters press just now," said the Limerick man ever so sweetly, "but I shall break every bone in your body for that speech some day."

He smiled genially, and led the way into the wood.

Featherston followed, and so did Stronge, who somehow disliked that smile. He hated Featherston and liked Barry, so he went after the two to protect the latter, though, in truth, the former had more need of his assistance.

They all walked on in a dead silence until they

came to a little grass dell hedged in by rhododendrons, very near the spot where Constantia had heard of Lord Varley's perfidy.

Here Barry came to a full stop.

"As Stronge is present to see fair play," he said, looking full at Featherston, who paled beneath the irony of his eye, "and lest I should have sharpers' coins in my pocket, I suggest that he should be the one to toss for us. Agreed? Now then, Stronge."

Stronge slowly and very unwillingly drew a florin from his pocket and flung it into the air. There was a moment's suspense, and then they knew that Featherston had won the toss.

He stood back a little from the other two, and glanced at them curiously. His eye brightened; his whole face became transformed; he drew himself up into a rather triumphant attitude. Yes, he was in luck assuredly; he had not been mistaken when he thought that he should win. This happy victory was but the beginning of the end; success would surely crown his every deed to-day.

He secured the florin that had done him so good a service, and held out another to Stronge.

"With your permission I shall keep this one," he said, "as a memento of this happy hour—as a sort of trophy, you will understand. It is, I feel assured, the harbinger of future joy."

"Hope, they say, wins half a battle," said Stronge, coldly if courteously. He would have liked Barry to win, though he honestly believed, now that he was in his clearest moments, that to neither of them would Constantia confide the precious treasure of herself. He was about to say something farther when a slight rustling behind the shrubs on their right hand caught their ears.

A footfall could be distinctly heard. Featherston and Barry glanced curiously in its direction. But Stronge grew pale. He knew!

Another second, and Constantia stepped quickly into the light.

CHAPTER XLIII.

SHOWING HOW CONSTANTIA GREW CONTEMPTUOUS.

BARRY burst out laughing. Here was a situation with a vengeance! There was nothing infectious about his laughter, however; it was suggestive of rather malicious amusement, and struck Stronge unpleasantly as being singularly out of place. But Barry saw only Constantia and a chance of revenge on Featherston.

"Ah! You, Constantia!" he cried gaily. He moved quickly towards her with something in his air that convinced Stronge he was wholly reckless now, and that, to interfere, would be but to make bad worse. "You have come in a happy hour! See, here is Featherston flying on the wings of love to lay his name and fortune at your feet."

"Are you mad?" exclaimed Stronge, roughly throwing out his arm to force the other backwards. "What folly is this? Have you no respect for her or for yourself?"

Constantia had stopped short; she did not look frightened, only a little troubled, a little vexed.

"What is it?" she asked, looking slowly from one to the other. After a while she grasped all the meaning of the scene, or at least nearly all, and she grew rather white. Upon Stronge her glance lingered longest.

"Come, Featherston, why don't you speak?" said Barry with a sneer. His face was as colourless as Constantia's, his nostrils dilated. Passion had full sway over him. "Take heart, man! So sure as you are of a good reception, why need you hesitate to declare yourself? Come, as you have already told us, the game is in your own hands. You have but to open your lips."

There was something very akin to murder in Featherston's eye, as Barry finished. His breath came quickly. He was evidently about to take some step, when Constantia's voice broke in clear and

distinct. She took no notice of either Stronge or Featherston.

"Garrett," she said in a low tone and very gently, "go home!"

There was something so calm, so dignified, yet so strong in the fresh young voice, and in the slight, girlish figure now drawn up to its fullest height, that Barry was sobered by it.

"As you will," he said, and bowing profoundly, he turned and left the spot.

"Is this thing true?" said Constantia then, flashing a curious glance at Featherston, whose demeanour was anything but easy. He was flushed, self-conscious to a painful degree, and almost trembling with vindictive anger. By a supreme effort he controlled himself, however, and prepared to answer her question with an air becoming to the moment.

"That I meant to address you thus in public—no," he said, with a touch of exalted resentment that did him credit. "That I am indeed here to-day as a suitor for your hand—yes. You must pardon me the coarseness of my approach. It was, as you know, thrust upon me. I would willingly have come on bended knee to sue for the one thing that can alone make my happiness."

He spoke with extreme humility and sensitiveness, making a great effort to undo the effects of Barry's fatal speech. His face was pale and earnest, his tone eloquent. He looked wonderfully handsome as he stood there, pleading to her with head uncovered beneath the soft widening branches of the trees.

Stronge made a movement as if to leave them; but Constantia put up her hand, and by a slight gesture checked him.

"Stay," she said, rather imperiously, lifting to his, two great eyes ablaze with scorn; "since you have been at the trouble of *bringing* Mr. Featherston here, I will ask you to remain a moment that you may take him back again."

Something in her tone struck like a chill on Feather-

ston's heart. He looked up quickly and marked the coldness, the unrelenting of her eyes. Yes, the old wound was open, no doubt; she thought of that hour on the terrace at Ballymore; yet despair was far from him even now; he assured himself, that if time were given him, he could combat successfully that damning memory.

"Grant me five minutes alone," he asked boldly.

"Not one," returned she softly. "There is no necessity for such—waste of time. You say you came here to-day to ask me to be your wife——"

"To entreat—to implore!" interrupted he passionately. "Constantia, if it be only *one* minute, give me that."

Some vague sense of his coming overthrow now dawned upon him. He felt maddened—savagely resentful—desperate.

"Not one," she said again. And then: "Do not make the thing harder for yourself," she said, with cold kindness. "Do not descend to entreaty—it is useless."

"Am I to understand that you decline my proposal?" demanded he, as one might who finds it impossible to believe the evidence of his own ears.

"Oh, I hope you will not misunderstand that," returned she gently.

"Do you know what you are doing?" cried he, now pale with vehement anger. "If you refuse me to-day it shall be a final thing. I shall not come back——"

"I am glad of that"—quietly.

"Constantia—think!" cried he, making a last violent effort to regain his hold on her. "If I have—offended you—still, you do not know all about it. I could, if you gave me an opportunity, explain it away. And is it nothing to you how I have loved you?"

He broke off abruptly, and looked at her with all the heart he had in his eyes. She returned his look bravely, and a little pale smile curled her lips.

"*Your* love!" she said. The contempt in her low

voice was terrible. He shrank beneath it. Yet it gave him hope.

"Ah, it is that old offence, then, that stands between us," he cried quickly. "You judged me too harshly there, believe me. I could make you understand. And if that is all——"

"All! Is it not enough? Is treachery nothing?" said she. She regarded him earnestly for a moment, and then: "But it is *not* all," she said, in a tone that had fallen almost to a whisper.

"What more?" asked he eagerly. Some trivial, girlish grief, no doubt; some vague neglect, but worse in her eyes, no doubt, than a heavier sin. If he could conquer this! Once more, delusive hope took possession of him. He felt a sense of coming victory. "Tell me," he said.

Constantia went up to him. She put out her right hand, and lightly touched the blue ribbon on his breast.

"Should *you* wear that?" she said.

He fell back from her. His whole face changed, and grew full of an abject fear.

"You mean?" he stammered faintly.

"You know what I mean?" The pretty, ringing voice was now cold and stern. "Should such a badge be lying on *your* breast?" She paused. "You see that I know all," she went on, more kindly. "Spare yourself and me, then, any further pain." She drew back with a soft gesture meant as a farewell, but he still lingered. "Oh, go!" she said.

There was a suspicion of contempt in her voice, as these two last words left her lips; and, roused by it, he turned aside, and, like a beaten hound, left her presence. He who had come to confer an honour on her, as he insolently deemed it, now crept from her sight, stricken, crushed by the weight of her scorn.

He went quickly, as though he could never soon enough escape from the scorching furnace of her clear eyes, and presently a kindly clump of laurestinas caught and hid him from her view.

A heavy sigh broke from her. It was a last tribute to a first illusion. She moved her head rest-

lessly, and so came face to face with Stronge, who, obedient to her commands, had remained upon the spot, but at so great a distance that what she and Featherston had said to each other was unheard by him. He was now gazing earnestly at her, and met the frown with which she greeted him with extreme fortitude. She had started violently, indeed, on first meeting his eyes, as one might who had been suddenly awakened from some painful dream; but she had recovered herself quickly.

"Did you come here to advocate his virtues?" she asked slowly.

CHAPTER XLIV

SHOWING HOW CONSTANTIA GREW TENDER.

SHE hardly noticed that he did not answer her. Her voice quivered with ill-suppressed emotion, and a sense of loss, of injury; and then died away altogether. That this man, who so lately had been himself at her feet, should come here coldly to-day to say a kindly word for another suitor, was very bitter to her. Was all his boasted devotion, then, worth just so much that he could fling it aside and forget it so entirely that it cost him nothing to bring to her another aspirant for that hand he had once considered priceless? And yet, of all others, she had believed that he——

The scorn died out of her eyes, and a little mist rose and blotted him for a moment from her sight. She was dismayed, astounded at the rush of feeling that threatened to overpower her. Was it disappointment, or grief, or despair? She felt suddenly dead cold as it were, and, by an heroic determination only, kept herself from openly shivering.

She felt very lonely, very unstrung. This parting with Featherston, which was of course the final touch

of all so far as they two were concerned, had affected her more than she knew, and had saddened her inexpressibly. There was almost aversion in her regard now for Featherston, yet she could not all at once forget that she *had* believed in him, and that he had proved himself unworthier than most.

And Mr. Stronge! A pang shot through her heart. Was he, too, unworthy?

She sighed again as though her heart was full, and lifted her heavy eyes to his. He had not answered her, as if he deemed the question undeserving a response. But she compelled him to speech of some sort.

"Was it you who brought him?" she persisted, fixing two aggrieved eyes on his.

"No; it was he brought me. I was on my way here when Barry and he met me. They asked me to accompany them."

"And you consented? Probably—it was a farce that promised so well—you were desirous of seeing it played out. Well, has it contented you, may I ask?" coming nearer to him,—“a mere poor matter of curiosity, mind—but—did you think I should favour him?"

"No," quietly. "I knew you would refuse him. I confess, however, I could not resist my anxiety to make sure. I should have gone when you commanded me to stay, but I was glad of that command; though I heard nothing, I could see that he left hope behind him when he went. Do you imagine," he asked sharply, "that if I had thought otherwise I could have stayed?"

"I cannot imagine your coming," she said coldly.

"If you will let me tell you about that," he said. She gave him an unspoken permission, and he told her the whole story of his meeting with them, and of how he feared a quarrel between the two men, and how he had gone with them into the wood to be ready to separate them should they, as he feared, come to blows. "It was just then you came on the scene," he wound up briefly, "It was the first time in my life I was not glad to see you. I remained

there at your request, because I do not trust Featherston, and because I knew that, however you might still regard him, you would not now consent to be his wife."

Something in his tone surprised and annoyed her.

"I regard him as a hypocrite," she said coldly. "In no other light. Do not make any mistake about that."

He flushed warmly.

"There was a time, however," he said, "when you—you—thought very kindly of him."

"Was that folly so apparent to all the world?" demanded she, with a frown and an unmirthful laugh. "Cannot a girl have a silly fancy without its being magnified into an undying attachment?"

"Yours died then?" He asked the question standing straight before her and regarding her steadily. "When?"

"The night of Mrs. Dundas's ball!" She answered him quite simply, without any shadow of displeasure. She did not even seem to have grasped the fact that his right to question her had no foundation, and that the question in itself was unusual. Her thoughts had flown to that miserable night, and like a flash she remembered her meeting there with Stronge; how he had spoken to her, and how she had mistaken him for Featherston, and——

The hot blood mounted to her brow. No wonder he had called her "kind" to Featherston. Oh, the shame of it all! As she grew crimson before him, her eyes slowly filled with tears.

"I know," exclaimed Stronge hastily, divining the thought that hurt her, and longing, in a vain, unhappy way, to be allowed to comfort her. "Don't look like that, there is no need for it. It was only a very natural mistake, after all; but it told me how you felt towards Featherston, and it told me, too, that any foolish hope I might still have entertained after—after your rejection of me—was at an end."

She made no answer to this. Her eyes were

lowered, and she was busy blinking back the tears out of them.

"You tell me now that Featherston is no longer of any account in your sight," he went on presently. "Of course I know nothing of that, or why it should be so." He paused. He did not ask for an explanation, but she knew he was hoping for one.

"It was a mere trifle; a matter of every-day occurrence," she said, with a flavour of bitterness in her low voice. "I happened to find out that he was making love to—to another woman, whilst pretending an affection for me."

"I see," said Stronge. He understood as well as though she had said it, that it was Mrs. Dundas who had worked this mischief. He dug little holes into the ground at his feet with his stick, and watched them with what seemed an extraordinary interest, because he could not bring himself to look at the proud, pained face of this girl, who was so inexpressibly dear to him. He could only think that Featherston had made her unhappy, and a kind of rage of hatred rose in his heart against him.

"The man is very poor," he said at last, in a tone, low, but so bitterly contemptuous, that it startled her. "So poor that one must pity him. And for such a woman to lose so much! To lose all!"

"I have a great deal to thank him for, however," said Constantia, with a curious smile. "If he had not, by a fortunate chance, betrayed himself that night, I might perhaps have permitted him to—make me wretched."

The smile was tremulous, and Stronge told himself that she still regretted Featherston, though to herself she would not acknowledge it. But in this he was wrong.

"That was a hateful night," she said, after a rather lengthened pause that he had not sought to break. She alluded to Donna's ball.

"For many reasons." He was studying her as

he spoke. "You are greatly changed since then, in some ways."

"So are you," she responded quickly, "in every way."

"Not in one, at all events. For that, I am the same now as I was then, and as I shall be always."

Her colour deserted her, and the flowers she held in her hand, and on which her eyes were bent, began to tremble.

"How in earnest you can be!" she said. "It is a great charm nowadays. I wonder, however, if your one way—is worth it."

"I am quite sure of that."

"Is it a secret?" said she, with an air so indifferent that it roused him to anger.

"Not from you, certainly," he said, with badly subdued indignation. "What does it advantage you to know me still your lover? What purpose do you gain by making me again declare that I cannot drive you from my heart?"

He turned aside impatiently, and moved towards the distant stile, as if determined on leaving her thus abruptly, without so much as the courtesy of an adieu. He walked quickly, led by his thoughts, which were now feverish. He cast no look behind.

Constantia, left in this way alone, let the flowers she held fall to her feet, and looked with troubled eyes at Stronge's rapidly retreating figure. Did he mean to go? And if he went now, would it be for ever? She hesitated for a full minute, until he had almost reached the corner, and then nature grew too strong for her. She took a step forward; a sudden desperate resolve fired her eyes; she threw out her hands impulsively.

"Andrew!" she cried.

CHAPTER XLV.

SHOWING HOW JOY CAME IN AN EVENING; AND HOW
CONSTANTIA BURST INTO TEARS.

HE started as the sound reached him, and turned to look at her. He could not see very distinctly the expression on her face, and all that was clear to him was that she stood there a very gracious presence on the soft green sward, to all appearance calm and self-possessed. Yet surely she had called to him. He had heard her. And by a name she had never used before, that he had never hoped to hear her use. Was it mere coquetry?

"You called me?" he said, when he had returned to a proper speaking distance, but no further. He felt passionately self-contemptuous, as he knew how his voice must betray to her the intensity of the emotion he was feeling.

"Yes; because——" Her face was as white as snow. "You say you love me still," she said at last very faintly.

He came nearer to her.

"I see no one as sweet, as beautiful, as lovable," he replied simply. "Why then should I ever cease to love you?"

"Once—you asked me to marry you."

"And you refused."

"I know," slowly. "But if you still love me——"

"Connie! Connie! What is it you are going to say to me?" cried he, in an agony of doubt. But a moment later he forgot everything, even his doubt, and caught her in his arms.

"Why don't you ask me again?" whispered she, half-laughing, half-crying.

Strange, with a hardihood he would not an hour ago have believed himself capable of, actually put her away from him for a moment, to look into her face. It was the shortest moment on record, yet it satisfied him. It was all true. then!

She had yielded to his embrace. There was no anger, there was only love in the upraised eyes. He held her unrebuked within his arms, this sweet, dear girl, whose hand he would not have dared to kiss only yesterday. Who was he, that such happiness should fall to his lot?

"I never hoped for this. I never believed in it," he said at last.

"Nor I." She was now looking at him in a sort of strange, if glad surprise. "I never knew, until five minutes ago, that I loved you."

This was an opportunity not to be lost. He sifted the tender matter thoroughly during another five minutes, and having made her say she really did love him, in half-a-dozen different ways, was partially content.

"But how did you know it five minutes ago?"

"Well, I think it must have been a little more than that—perhaps even ten minutes. It just dawned upon me when I knew that Mr. Featherston had come here to—to ask me to marry him—and when I thought you had come to advise me to——"

"To what, darling?"

"Oh, I don't know; it was absurd, of course. I know that now," with a little happy laugh; "but I was stupid enough to think then that you were going to befriend him in his suit. Oh, if you had!" she said. She looked quite angrily at him, but this anger was inexpressibly sweet to the innocent culprit.

"Why, all that happened quite half-an-hour ago," said he, with a view to diverting her thoughts, "and you said five minutes."

"It's all the same," said she, with a truly delightful broadness of thought; "don't you think so?"

This sudden question put him out a little. He did not think five minutes the same as thirty, but he felt it was his duty so to think, now that he knew she thought so. His hesitation was infinitesimally short, but she noticed it.

"No?" she said, regarding him with a certain

severity. "You found, then, the time—(this half-hour, is it?)—spent with me *long*—terribly long?"

"Nonsense," said he, so indignantly that they both laughed. "I *should* have found it long, however," he said presently, "considering how you scolded me from the first minute of it to the last."

"I was unjust to you," she said remorsefully.

"I am glad of it; you wouldn't have been unjust if you hadn't loved me." He started a little as he said that, as if at the presumption of it. "You *do* love me," he said, drawing her into his arms once more with a gentle, tender, protecting touch; and then: "to think I, of all men, should be able to say that!"

"Why not you above all men?" said she softly. "I do not believe there is one on earth so good as you."

"We won't go into that," said he, smiling; "but, at all events, there is not one so happy." Then a thought struck him. "Connie, say that you are happy, too," he said.

All at once, as the word fell upon her ears, there rose before her the scene that had taken place on this very spot last evening. Happy!—was she really permitting herself such happiness as excluded from her mind all remembrance of Lady Varley's impending trouble? Even now time was pressing. If anything were to be done to help her, it should be done at once. To-morrow would be too late, and already it was drawing towards evening. She had promised the girl Kitty to interfere in some wise for the defence of her mistress and the overthrow of her enemies, but as yet, even after a sleepless night, inspiration had not come to her.

Oh, if this terrible thing should happen! If Lady Varley were to be crushed, and rendered even more miserable than she now was through Donna Dundas—through her, Constantia's, cousin—she felt as though she could never again look at Yolande with honest eyes, or clasp her hand. Dishonour would come to her through her friend's kinswoman,

and surely some of the taint would fall upon the "friend."

How time was rushing away—not gliding peacefully, as it often did, but hurrying, as though eager to see consummated this hateful crime! And what was to be done? To speak to Yolande, to disclose all to her. That would be the kindest, the wisest, the cruellest course; and she felt she could not be the one to do it.

Stronge had put his earnest question to her, and was waiting in a strange silence for her answer. How long it was in coming! A little chill seized upon his heart at last, and, unable to endure the suspense, he repeated his words, more slowly, more fearfully, this time.

"Connie, answer me. *Are you happy?*"

It was too much. Happy! She? With Yolande on the brink of such a horrible pit? She drew a quick breath, and all suddenly burst into tears.

"Happy? No! I am wretched," she cried, forgetful of all save Lady Varley just then—even of him.

"Wretched! Constantia, what a thing to say to me! Are you now going to tell me," growing very pale, "that all my hope is——"

"No, no," clinging to him, "you are everything to me; it is not that; how could you think it? But I have heard such dreadful news. Yesterday, after you and Garrett left me, I heard it; and I have been so miserable ever since, until," lifting her eyes to his, "a little while ago."

He made her a lover's acknowledgment of this sweet admission, and then she went on:

"It is a terrible thing. All last night I lay awake wondering about it, and troubled because I could not see my way to be of use to her. But you—you are very clever. I will tell you all about it, and you, perhaps, will think of something."

She lifted her pretty, sorrowful face to his with such perfect trust and expectation in it as made his heart beat. Something in his earnest glance gave her hope.

"Oh, what a comfort it is to have you to consult with!" she said, with a sigh of deepest relief, laying her cheek against his arm.

Was there any man in all the world, then, so proud as Andrew Stronge?

He drew her closer to his heart and held her there.

"I never thought I should live to be as happy as I am this minute," he said, in a low tone. "Now go on, my sweetheart, and tell me all about it." As yet he was in the dark as to her exact meaning, but she trusted him, she leaned upon him, he was not ignorant of *that*.

He was, too, when all the sad story was laid before him, as concerned, as astounded, by her intelligence, as she could possibly desire. But hope he could not give her. It was plain to her from the beginning that he believed the miserable affair to be not only possible but probable.

"Good heavens! what is to be done?" he said at last.

"At all risks Lady Varley must be prevented from hearing it," said Constantia eagerly; "it would kill her, coming so soon on that last sad grief. You remember? That little child—she will never forget. Oh, no, she must not hear of this thing. We must manage it so that it never comes to her ears."

"But is that a very wise arrangement, do you think?" asked Stronge gently. "Why should she, whom it most concerns, be the last to hear of it? Connie, do you know I often think that half the fatal mistakes in the world are caused by keeping back the truth from those who should be the first to learn it? Why should Lady Varley be left in ignorance, darling, of what is of such vital importance to her, whilst you and I, to whom it is a mere outside sorrow, are acquainted with it? Surely she, being one of the chief actors in this evil drama, should be the best judge of how to bring the play to a successful conclusion."

"I understand. I follow you," she said, in a

distressed tone. "But who would have the courage to lay the truth bare to her? Oh, think! The cruelty of it!"

"It may be cruel; but, nevertheless, it would be the kindest thing to do," replied he gently. "And I think Lady Varley, at least, would agree with me. Darkness eventually leads to greater depths of darkness where the human brain is concerned. And to keep Lady Varley in the dark now would be but to increase her misery hereafter, when all the bold light of a cruel truth was forced upon her."

"But the misery of the present——"

"It would not be so painful to her as it might be to others. There is always this saving clause, that she is not in love with her husband."

"Ah! you have seen that?" said Constantia quickly.

"I was glad to see it, because it helps me to believe she will not feel so much—that she will bear the news better. She may even, if told in time, be able so to manage as to lift the man to a sense of decency. At all events, I know she should be told."

"But who is to tell her?" asked Constantia faintly.

CHAPTER XLVI.

SHOWING HOW NORAH WAS KINDLY PLEASED TO EXPRESS
HERSELF SATISFIED.

STRONGE, thus appealed to, released her in part, and putting her back from him, seized both her hands in his kindly grasp, and looked into her eyes.

"You she loves," he said simply.

"Ah! you would lay this task upon me?" she faltered. "You think *I* should go?"

"Not unless you, too, think it, my beloved."

"I have thought of it, though I shrank from it. But, oh, Andrew, is there no one else? *Must* I be the one?"

He felt she was trembling. "Have you the courage, darling?" he said; "or is it too much for you? Yes, I see it is. Come, then, let us decide upon some other plan."

"No. I shall go. There is no other," said the girl sadly, with a little catch in her breath. "If you think she should be warned, who should warn her save me? I am her friend. What right have I to shrink from it?"

Tears rose to her eyes again, and somehow this time she lost her hold upon them, and they rushed over her lids, and ran triumphantly down her cheeks. They cut Stronge to the heart.

"To think you should be crying in this our first hour together!" he said, with deep remorse. Was it not all his fault?

"In this my very happiest hour," replied she sweetly. Indeed, it seemed to her just then that all her own fears and difficulties had passed away from her for ever, and only peace remained. He was so good, so true, so honest! Such a sense of rest, of comfort, stole over her as she gazed into his gentle,

kindly eyes, that but for this disgrace that threatened her friend, and the terror of having to face and tell her of it, she would have counted herself only too happy.

"I have no right to lay this burden on you," he said earnestly. "Will you hate me for it, Counie? Will you"—wistfully—"always look back with distaste upon this day because of it? And yet I could not counsel you otherwise. I feel"—lifting her hand, and kissing the palm of it—"it is only what my brave girl should do."

"It is what you would do yourself," said Constantia. "I follow in your footsteps, and"—warmly—"I desire no better model than you."

"When did you first think of me in—in that way?" asked Stronge, drawing her down upon a garden seat. "How did it all come about? It seems to me the most marvellous thing! Just when I had given up all hope, lo! hope was in the ascendant. Well! I think we shall agree very well together."

He spoke so gladly. Indeed, he felt as though he would like to get up and publish his joy to all the world.

"I think so, too," said Connie. She slipped her hand into his and looked at him from under her long lashes with a glance that was half shy, half amused. A soft little laugh broke from her. Again she had forgotten everything, save the strange, sweet fact that she had really given her heart to this plain, tender, most lovable man.

"Yet it has been a sad engagement-day," said he. "There were tears, and surely they should not have been in it. Perhaps"—he looked at her nervously, with all a true lover's superstitious dread—"perhaps it is unlucky."

"Oh, no." She smiled at him very prettily. "There is no ill-luck where you are."

"No? You think not? That only proves how awfully commonplace I am. I never cared about it before, but I wish, for your sake, Connie, that I was less prosaic, less—you know what I mean—that is, I

wish I was better-looking, at all events," he blurted out shamefacedly.

"What folly!" indignantly. "Now I shall tell you something. Do you know that the very first day I ever saw you I thought to myself that you had the very dearest face, so kind, so earnest; not"—hesitating as if still a little uncertain—"not *handsome*, exactly, but——"

Stronge gave way to unlimited mirth.

"Well, no, not handsome," he said. "I'll commit myself so far. Oh, Connie, what a humbug you are! And—what a *darling* girl!"

The sound of a childish voice trilling some fanciful lay came to them from behind the flowering shrubs.

"It is Norah," said Constantia, in a quick whisper. "She will be here in another minute. Shall we tell her?"

"Of course! Dear little thing. It is another pleasure to know that she will be, in reality, my sister."

"But not a word of Lady Varley," entreated Constantia hurriedly. "She would not understand—she could not. And about that. I shall go to her this evening, when the dusk falls."

"Very well. I shall be at the gate to go with you."

"Will you?" brightening. "Ah! that will give me courage." She moved quickly away from him as Norah came from behind the shrubs. She ran towards them with an exclamation of relief.

"At last I have found you," she cried, with a comical blending of pleasure and malicious amusement in her tone. She precipitated herself upon Constantia. "Oh, Connie, Aunt Bridget has been in such a dancing rage for the last hour, asking for you, and——" She stopped short suddenly, and looked from Constantia to Stronge, and back again. "I say, how funny you two do look!" she said at last, in a subdued sort of way.

"How do we look?" asked Stronge, laughing.

"As if something had happened to you—as if

you had seen something queer. I think you both look—ashamed,” said the child, with a curious glance.

At this Constantia joined in Stronge’s mirth, though her colour deepened.

“You are right, Norah,” said Stronge; “something has happened. Shall I tell you what it is?”

Norah grew instantly full of the liveliest curiosity.

“Don’t go on explaining things,” she said. “Tell me all at once.”

“Promise me first that you will be pleased.”

“What on earth can it be?” said Norah, half to herself. There was evidently a mental struggle. “Yes, I’ll promise,” she said, giving this rash word because so borne away by her desire to please.

“Well, then, Connie has made me a present of you.”

“Oh, fudge!” said the younger Miss MacGillcuddy, with a disgusted air. “What’s the meaning of that, I’d like to know! We aren’t African slaves, are we, that we can be sold to people?” She looked with wrathful reproach at Constantia. Was their grand secret nothing, after all?

“Nevertheless, she has given you to me—as a little sister,” said Stronge. “She has given me even more than that; she has given me herself. Now, be true to your promise, and say you are glad.”

“But——” said the child in a bewildered tone.

“Connie has promised to marry me,” said Stronge, oh! so proudly.

“No! Oh, Connie, I *am* so glad!” cried Norah, flinging herself into her arms. “He is ever so much nicer than Garrett, and as for Mr. Featherston!” She turned up a very contemptuous nose. “You *are* a lucky girl!”

“You will notice that it is I who have received all the congratulations,” said Constantia, with a smile, half shy, half comical, at Stronge, who seemed almost annoyed with Norah.

“Come,” he said, “am I not lucky too? I have

won Connie. I have won her whole heart, she tells me."

"You have won two whole hearts," cried the child affectionately; and, releasing herself from her sister's clasp, she ran to Stronge, and treated him to a loving hug. "I'll call you Andrew now," she said, as a sign that she was specially friendly towards him. "I'd go even further, and make it Andy, but I'm afraid Con would think that horrid."

"I shouldn't," declared Constantia. "I—I was thinking," with a quick flush, "that that is what I should call him myself—Andy!" She said it slowly, tenderly, as if trying it. "That is, if you wouldn't dislike it," looking doubtfully at her lover, who seemed lost in thought.

"How could I ever have thought it such a hideous name?" he said at last in a sort of wonder. "Really, when you pronounced it just now, it sounded quite pretty, eh?"

Surely this alone should have been sufficient to convince her of the depth of his infatuation.

CHAPTER XLVII.

SHOWING HOW LADY VARLEY SAID FAREWELL TO HER
LAST GLIMPSE OF HAPPINESS.

THE servant told him she was in the rose garden, and O'Grady turned slowly towards the walk that led to it. His step was tardy, and almost hesitating. It seemed to him a very long time since last his eyes rested on her, and he frankly acknowledged to himself that he dreaded the first glance.

He went through one of the many quaint openings in the old yew hedge, and presently found himself in a very wilderness of perfumed rose-leaves. They lay here and there, nay everywhere; they made a carpet of the grass beneath. Just freshly fallen, dying, dead; in all stages bearing on the last sad end, they lay. They struck him with a peculiar melancholy: as *they* were, crushed, withered, dead, so were her hopes of happiness.

He wondered if she quite knew of the full extent of Varley's inconstancy. And if so, how was she taking it? He had not seen her for ten days, ten interminable days in which he had schooled himself in vain, and fancied he was persuading himself to leave her for ever, and return to his old wandering life. But this wild, sad passion that had grown so swiftly into a perfect life, had conquered him, and brought him once more to her feet.

Yet he shrank from meeting her. A touch of cowardice rendered his step slow, as he drew near the spot to which he had been directed, and where he hoped, yet feared to see her.

He went very leisurely, admonishing himself as to how he should speak to her; yet at the last he came upon her so suddenly, that he started visibly in spite of his determination to be singularly self-possessed, and forgot all he had arranged to say.

She was sitting in a low garden-chair, dressed in a simple white gown, and with her hat lying on the sward beside her. She was knitting some pretty, gaudy bit of fancy work in a listless, uninterested fashion, and the sun shone gaily on the steel needles, sending tiny glints of light upwards, as they flashed to and fro. He remembered that when last he saw her thus occupied she was making a pair of wee blue silken socks, and the remembrance cost him a pang for her.

She was looking very pale, very ill he thought; and her hands were thin to emaciation. Such lovely little hands! but too transparent, too delicately traced with blue veins. She looked tired to death too, and as a woman might who had bidden an eternal farewell to joy of any kind.

She glanced up quickly as he approached, and, as she saw him, a strange warm flush dyed her face. It went as it came, so suddenly, that one might almost doubt its having been. But O'Grady did not doubt; and a sense of happiness extravagantly keen thrilled him through and through. Oh, that he could keep her . . . that he dared! . . . If she were far away from all this misery, how would it be with her? . . . And to have that sweet life wasted!

His thoughts ran so riot, that he scarcely heard her first words. She greeted him in her pretty, gentle way, and told him she was glad to see him. He had been quite a stranger lately. He would stay now, and let her give him his tea?

He dropped into a chair a little distance from her, and fell into what he supposed was ordinary conversation, though he could never afterwards recall a word of it. He knew that he was watching her, and noting each change in her face since last they met. There was no vaguest expectation, as there was no bliss, in his devotion. To him "love was a barren sea, bitter and deep." He might see her—he dared not touch her. He should never be more to her than he was to-day, unless—unless——

Presently tea was brought to them, and laid upon

a gipsy-table. As she poured it out, he once again noticed the white languor of the hands as they moved wearily amongst the gaudy Crown Derby cups and saucers, and the quaint old silver that had been new a hundred years ago ; and, as he noticed, a deadly fear grew about his heart.

"You are not well," he said at last, feeling he could no longer refrain from speaking of the one thing that possessed him. She looked at him with a faint smile.

"Why do you think that?" she said. "Believe me, I am only too well. There is nothing the matter with me."

"Nothing ! Do you sleep ? Do you eat ?"

"Let me tell you something," she said. "I have made a discovery ! I have found out that it is possible to live without either of those so-called necessities."

"And for how long ? Have you discovered that, too ? Do you think it is so easy to deceive one ?" said he, with ill-subdued vehemence. "No, you are not well, say what you may."

"How I wish I could think that !" returned she softly. "To know that my days were indeed numbered ! No ; there is no such comfort——" She broke off abruptly. "The heat makes me pale," she went on again, putting up her hands to her wan cheeks. "In the winter I shall be myself again."

"In the winter you will be in heaven, if this goes on," said he bitterly. "You should leave this place. It is madness your remaining here ! It—the air does not suit you ; and the life altogether is killing you." Then he forgot himself a little in the cruel fear that was consuming him. "Why should you consent to look on ?" he said, in a low tone, and with a heavy frown.

She paled. For a moment she looked as though she were about to drive him from her presence ; but then the light died from her eyes, and a forlorn expression grew upon her face, as though she had said to herself : "It is of no use." She clasped

her hands tightly, and compelled herself to look at him.

"I know what you mean," she said, speaking quickly and with uncertain breath. "Why should I pretend ignorance of what," biting her lip sharply, "the whole world regards as a tale that is told? Besides," with a touch of passion, "I am tired of pretending!" Then all at once her sudden vehemence died from her. Her voice sank. "Nevertheless," she said, with a touch of that simple dignity that ever sat so sweetly on her, "I would not have you speak to me of—of anything that hurts me. When you are gone I shall like to think of you as one altogether set apart from all but pleasant memories."

"You speak of my going. What do you know of that?"

"I think you will go. By degrees all things slip from me. You are a friend, I feel, I know; so you, too, will fade out of my life. I hope," she said with a strange smile, "that it will be a short one; but I am afraid—I am *afraid* not!"

"Do not talk like that," he said roughly. He got up abruptly, and pushed his chair from him, and began to walk with rapid steps up and down the velvety grass. It was growing towards evening, and as he moved, his tall, gaunt figure cast a gigantic shadow that fell across her feet.

"You grow morbid sitting here day after day," he said presently; "you want change. Entire change of scene, as well as of—people."

"Would change of scene kill thought?"

"I hope so, I believe so." He came up close to where she sat, and stood looking down at her. It struck her that he was singularly colourless, and that there was something unusual in his glance.

"No," she said, "there can be no change for me while life clings to me. There will be only patience, patience, patience."

She repeated the word slowly as if striving to impress it on her brain. She folded her hands gently upon her knees. Her face was calm to

immobility, and there were no tears in her eyes, yet O'Grady thought it was the saddest he had ever seen. There was no impatience in her tone, only an abiding sorrow, and it seemed to him that she looked like a sad picture he had seen somewhere, in her white clinging gown, adorned with its sombre bows of mourning ribbon.

Silence followed her voice. He could think of nothing he dared say, though many words were burning on his tongue. There was something in her folded hands, something in her whole aspect that rendered him dumb. She was looking earnestly away from him, not upwards, but straight before her into some land unknown to him—farther than eye could pierce.

Then all at once she came back to earth. Her clasped hands loosened, and a long, miserable sigh escaped her.

It broke the bond of reverent silence that held him. There was in that sigh, more of cruel despair than that resignation for which she daily prayed. He heard it, and it maddened him. His right mind grew warped; the blood surged around his heart. He hardly tried to keep back the words that rose to his lips.

"There are other scenes—other lands," he said deliberately, but unsteadily, his eyes on the ground. "And there is one who would pray you on his knees to be permitted to devote his life to yours. And—happiness must be somewhere."

"Surely, my friend, but not for me," replied she very gently. There was a determined ignoring of his meaning that roused him, and drove him farther on his vain quest.

"Think," he said, "think of the life here, and of that other. What binds you to this place? And all that I have told you of, lies at your feet if you will only stoop to pick them up."

"*To stoop!*" The words were so low as to be almost a whisper. They were however clear, and they struck a chill to his heart. Involuntarily he looked at her, but if she had felt any emotion, anger,

reproach, or surprise on uttering them, it was all past. "I hope you will gain that Arcadia of which you speak," she said with a calm smile. "For myself, I shall remain here." She held out to him her slender hand. She had fathomed his thought—he told himself—but she had, too, estimated the depth of his temptation, and so forgiven him. He felt as if he could have fallen at her feet and kissed the hem of her garment. How had he dared to say such a thing to her, his sweet saint? What grace was hers, to be enabled thus speedily to forgive! And no harsh word, no single reproach, no punishment, save what lay in the compelling of him to receive that gentle smile.

The cooing of the woodquests in the groves below grew louder. The peacocks strutted gaily up and down upon the stone terrace, where the shadows lay long.

"You see I prophesied truly," she said, at last. "I told you you would shortly go—to this Arcadia of yours, I trust, I hope."

"A vain hope. You can abandon it as soon as you will." He spoke sadly, but the passion was gone from his moody eyes, and he was again calm. He stooped and pressed his lips respectfully to her hand.

"You go, nevertheless?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And soon?"

"Decide that too," he said bitterly. "If you bid me go now, this moment, I shall obey you."

"What have I to do with it?" she said coldly. She rose to her feet, as if to bid him farewell.

"Shall I answer you?" demanded he, with a sto my look in his eyes. She caught it full, and all at once her strength forsook her.

"No, no," she entreated faintly.

"Forgive me," said he quickly. "And—farewell." He took her hand and held it between both his own. "Farewell for ever!" he said brokenly, and in another moment had crossed the plateau, and was gone.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

SHOWING HOW THE FIRST SCENE WAS PLAYED IN THE
LAST ACT OF ALL.

HE was gone!—she knew that, in a dull sort of way—gone for ever, and at her own bidding! But everything she *seemed* to have, escaped her. She could not recall a word he had said, and the vain struggle to remember only distressed her the more.

Daylight faded as she still sat on there, motionless. But she scarcely noticed that, until the vague chill that falls even into a summer's night oppressed and sent a shiver through her. She rose then heavily, and went in-doors, and up to her own rooms, and told her woman she would not dine below that night. All the week she had shrunk from that solitary dinner, compelling herself to undergo it, and endure the scrutiny of the men, who doubtless knew only too well where their master was at that hour. But to-night she felt she had passed her utmost limit, and that she could bear no more.

In her darkened room she paced up and down, now swiftly, as thought overcame her, now with languid footsteps. Her maid had drawn the curtains, but she had forbidden her to light the lamps, and in the soft dusk of the summer night she dreed her weird alone.

There was a very passion of despair at her heart, an awful sense of loneliness that threatened to rise and destroy her. She struggled against it with all her might, but it was hard to fight. She would not even permit herself to put her last great grief into a bodily presence; but the vague shadow that would not be suppressed was almost too strong for her.

And what was there left her, that she should fight so fiercely? In all her life, what thing sweet was there, to which she might honestly cling? She was

standing upon a desolate shore, where everything that should make life bearable was unknown. It was a barren spot she had been cast upon, bereft of all things desirable.

Her child was in heaven; her husband had betrayed her. Nothing remained. Nothing? In the darkness O'Grady's face rose before her—gaunt, earnest, impassioned. For a while she succumbed to the vision, and let her memory dwell upon it; but after a while she rose angrily to her feet, and cast it from her. She made a haughty gesture with her hand, descriptive of deep self-contempt, and, going over to the nearest window, pulled the curtains apart, as though action of some sort was indispensable to her.

A flood of early moonlight rushed into the room. It seemed to come straight from heaven, the heaven where her child dwelt. It encompassed her, and seemed to her, in her unstrung state, to have been sent by the little one as a sign, a token that she was remembered there by her. A sob burst from her. And at this instant the door was opened softly, and Constantia entered.

"In the dark, dear? To sit in the dark like this—oh, it is very wrong of you!" she said, with tender scolding.

She had but just parted with Stronge, who had brought her to the hall-door, and she was feeling singularly nervous; but the sight of Lady Varley standing in the moonlight, in her straight, clinging white gown, had somehow given her courage. She looked so lonely, so forsaken—— Oh, that any one should *dare* to treat her so! Her affection rose in arms, and rendered her strong.

"I had forgotten it was dark," said Lady Varley, in a subdued tone. "It is a sweet hour—calm and soothing. One can think—remember—better so."

That her mind was with her little dead child now in Paradise, Constantia knew.

"But to think too much, that is bad," she said.

"For girls like you—yes," said Lady Varley. She roused herself with a sudden effort, and smiled kindly on this, her dearest friend. "But for me all hours are alike; they do me neither harm nor good. However, you shall have lights." She moved towards the bell. "Young hearts grow towards the sun; you shall have its best imitation now, as I cannot offer you the real thing."

Constantia stayed her, however, before she could ring. She laid her hand entreatingly upon her arm. How could she tell her miserable tale—how warn her of this last crowning act of treachery on her husband's part, if that pale, patient face was plain to her? Better the darkness, where its agony, its cruel indignation might be hidden. Alas! what a terrible task was hers, to make even sadder this already too sad woman!

Then somehow she told her, getting through the hateful story without let or hindrance from Lady Varley, who never opened her lips from the beginning of it to the end.

"I give it to you as I heard it. It may not be true," said Constantia at the close, in a very agony of nervous dread.

"It is true," said Lady Varley. Her voice was quiet, but distinct and cold. "This is the end, then."

Her calm frightened Constantia more than an outburst would have done. That would have been natural.

"Oh, why be too sure?" she said, even whilst feeling herself a hypocrite in thus offering a hope in which she did not believe. "It may be only——"

"Do not take all that trouble, Connie," said Lady Varley, putting up her hand. "You know—you are as sure as I am. Why deny it? It is the end, I tell you."

"Why should it be?" cried Constantia hotly. "Why should you so tamely give in? Let us think how to prevent it—how to avert the accomplishment of this vile deed."

"But why prevent it? The child is dead," said Lady Varley in a tired voice. "What is there to care about? I would not have had *her* shamed—my innocent! but as for myself——"

"Honour is always sweet," interrupted Constantia warmly. "And no one likes publicity of this sort. Oh, rouse yourself, Yolande, and try to stop this scandal! If one were to go to her—to reason with her—to threaten exposure!"

"What would such as she care about exposure?" said Lady Varley, with cold contempt.

"Ah! but exposure *beforehand*. One could telegraph to Mr. Dundas—his address must surely be known by some of the servants; that might frighten her. But the time is short, to-morrow is almost on us, yet I do think if one were to speak to her——"

"Or to him," said Lady Varley, in the same measured, unnatural tone.

"Well—yes—perhaps. And he would be here——"

"Oh, no, he would be *there*." Lady Varley laughed bitterly. "Indeed, both our suggestions are as one, as it would be as impossible now to see Mrs. Dundas without Lord Varley, as him without her. They are inseparable, I am told. For myself I know nothing personally, as I have not seen him for three days."

There was something in the callousness of her tone that frightened Constantia. She was not like the old Yolande she knew and loved, but like some creature who had been frozen into stone.

"Well, as you have said, let him be reasoned with," advised Constantia. "He would, in all probability, be more open to a good influence than she. But who would you choose to speak to him?"

"No one. I shall go myself to-night," said Lady Varley, with determination. She rose from her chair.

"You! Oh, no," exclaimed Constantia faintly. "To undertake such a task, and at this hour!"

"Why should I not undertake it? You alluded to my honour just now; if it is so precious as you say,

who should look so well after it as I?" There was a touch of mockery in her tone.

"But the servants; they will think it so strange your going out so late in the evening, and to Ballymore of all places."

"Why need they know? Do you think I shall order out a carriage and pair in which to bring back in chains my recreant lord?" She laughed as she said this, such a short, wild, miserable laugh, as made Constantia start. "No, I shall walk there."

"So late! Be advised, dear, do not," said Constantia entreatingly. "Or at least take me with you; or—or Mr. Stronge."

"No one. I shall go alone; I shall confront that woman alone!" Then her calm broke down and her voice deepened into a sort of suppressed fury. "Great heaven!" she said, "that such women should be allowed to live and thrive! Of what avail is goodness, then? We, who still hold to the old traditions of decency, are brushed aside by these creatures who know no law but their own desires. Pah! the very thought of them contaminates one." She turned fiercely upon Constantia. "Go home," she said, "you are too young to be mixed up with such an affair as this. As for me——"

"Do not send me from you," cried Constantia nervously. "And what is it you would say about yourself?"

"Only that I am learning—learning, old as I am." A pale smile crossed her lips. "Did you think all knowledge was acquired in one's schoolroom? I am learning the folly of endurance. *Why* should I endure? Why should I alone suffer every day, and all day long, by night and morn? There is consolation for me too, no doubt, somewhere, if I choose to look for it."

"Surely," said Constantia gravely. She was puzzled and unnerved by the other's manner, and by the long strain of the whole past day. To see Lady Varley, always so calm and self-possessed, give herself up thus to such a reckless vehemence filled

her with a nameless alarm. She did not understand what she meant, yet it frightened her, and this fear, coming just now when she was tired in mind and body, made her feel intolerably weak. "The world is not without comfort," she said, "even for the most miserable. This consolation you speak of—why do you not look for it?"

The innocence of the answer struck Lady Varley like a blow. She burst into a low, unmirthful laugh.

"You advise me, then?" she said.

There was something in the laugh that increased Constantia's perplexity. Her eyes filled with tears. She went up to Lady Varley, and passed her arm around her neck. She hardly knew why she did it. It was in a measure, perhaps, a sort of protective movement, though she could not have explained it.

Lady Varley shrank from her. For the bare moment she lost all sense of the *necessity* for purity. She remembered only that she was a wife scorned, and that O'Grady loved her. And oh! to be loved by some one, and by—him! It was but a momentary weakness, yet while it lasted she would not suffer the girl to touch her. She put out her hands and tried to push her from her, but Constantia was not thus easily to be repulsed.

"Speak to me, Yolande. Tell me what you are thinking of?" she entreated tenderly.

Lady Varley shuddered.

"It was nothing," she said faintly; "a mere passing madness. It is gone for ever. But I am very unhappy, Connie. I," feverishly, "sometimes don't know how to manage my thoughts."

"Why not let them dwell upon your little one? If sadness lies in that, still it must comfort you to know she is safe—secure."

"There you are wrong. To think of her is terrible to me," said Lady Varley, beginning to pace up and down the room in the light of the uncertain moon. "I think of her for ever, but that does not soothe me. I follow her down into her earthy home,

to wonder what she is like now—to picture her to myself as she lies there, with——”

“Oh, no!” cried Constantia, with a strong shudder.

“There is nothing—nothing,” replied Lady Varley, in a mournful tone. “Only a few poor little bones. I am glad of that. At first it was dreadful to picture it day after day, but now, I think, *I am sure*, there are only bones. I should not know her now. The pretty mouth—the lovely eyes—the baby smile—all—all are gone; only the bones lie there.”

Constantia felt cold and faint.

“Do not talk of it,” she said tremulously.

“No,” with a sigh; “better talk of that we have in hand. It is growing late. Come, Connie, you shall accompany me part of the way, at all events; so far, at least, as will bring you to your own gate.”

“And you—will you really go now to Ballymore?”

“This moment. I shall let the servants think what they like, for, after all, it would be impossible to conceal anything from them.”

“Still I think if you were to suggest to them that you were coming to me for an hour or so, it would sound better,” said Constantia nervously. “And from The Cottage Mr. Stronge will drive you on to Ballymore.”

“Mr. Stronge! Where is he?”

“In the avenue, waiting for me,” confessed Constantia shyly.

Lady Varley regarded her keenly.

“Are you going to marry him?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“I am glad of that. Heartily glad. For you at least there is a sure chance of happiness. Well, you and he shall arrange this matter for me—come.”

CHAPTER XLIX.

SHOWING HOW MR. DUNDAS MADE HIS WAY HOME SOMEWHAT UNEXPECTEDLY.

THE old town clock struck ten as the train steamed slowly into the station. For once therefore it was in time. It was a dark night, murky and rather chill; the wind had risen and there was a suspicion of rain in the air.

Mr. Dundas, as he stepped on to the platform, shivered a little and stamped his feet, and buttoned his coat more closely round him, in spite of the fact that it was still summer.

"Didn't expect you home so soon, sir," said the station-master with a smile, as he took his ticket. Every one liked grave John Dundas and had a pleasant word for him.

"I didn't expect it myself," he replied; "and, after all, it will be only a flying visit, scarcely worth mentioning."

"Indeed, sir—off again in a hurry? Here to-day and gone to-morrow, as it were." The station-master was a cheery person who liked to hear his own voice.

"Just so," said Mr. Dundas.

As he stepped into the fuller darkness outside he ran up against Featherston.

"Ah! You, Dundas!" said he, as if astounded.

"And no other," returned Dundas, laughing. "I might be my own ghost, so satisfactorily have I surprised every one I have met by my sudden return; but the fact is, that fellow Hawkins has been troublesome again. You know—I've told you a thousand times, I dare say—how I have sworn to put down these poaching affrays, no matter what

time or trouble it costs me; and this morning I had a telegram from Jeffreys telling me of a serious attack made last night on the young pheasants."

"I heard of it; but I really think Jeffreys rather exaggerated the affair. He's a wonderfully zealous fellow, it must be allowed, but *point de zèle*, you know, is excellent advice in most matters. I fear the honest Jeffreys has rather overdone it this time, and given you your journey for nothing. From what I understand it was nothing at all serious; but he's an excellent fellow, Jeffreys, and it is unwise to be too hard upon a careful servant."

"My dear Featherston, I am the last man to be hard in such a case as this. I am, no matter how it stands, intensely obliged to Jeffreys. To confess a truth to you, I was sick of the stifling town, and," stretching his arms lazily, "am enchanted with the thought that I shall have, at least, a few hours of decent air before I go back to it again. Lawyers are but poor company—dry, very dry; so I was only too glad of the excuse to leave them to fill up their fusty parchments in my absence, and run down south even for a day."

"Mrs. Dundas will thank Jeffreys, too, no doubt. She did not come to meet you?"

"No; in fact, I—er—I didn't tell her I was coming. I thought I'd take her by surprise," said John Dundas, a little shyly, but with such a ring of expectant happiness in his voice as convinced Featherston that his belief in his wife was perfect, and that, as yet, no suspicion had crept in. That he had done a vilely cruel thing in giving a chance for the entrance of this suspicion did not disturb him.

"Mrs. Dundas does not know you are coming, then?" He asked the question to make himself entirely sure of the fact that the comedy promised would not prove a failure.

"No; I really had hardly a moment to send her word," said Dundas, who was beginning to be rather ashamed of the schoolboy longing to take some one unawares that had possessed him when he decided on

keeping his sudden home-coming secret from his darling.

All this was news to Featherston, though the sending of the telegram was not. He had squared Jeffreys about that, and, close-fisted as he was, had not held back from such a bribe as induced the man to do his bidding. He had only meant, however, to bring back Dundas a day too soon upon the scene, and so spoil Donna's plans, for the present at all events. The future might see him victorious, too! He owed her something, and in this wise sought to pay it.

But now, he told himself, the plot was thickening of its own accord—at least without help from him. How if madame was receiving her friend to-night? The friend was always at Ballymore now, he had been told, in season and out of it. How if the two men should meet—the trusting husband, the too welcome lover! Ah! here was a real vengeance laid ready to his hand, without cost of thought, or plan, or plot. A slow smile stole over his face; his hand stroked down his blonde moustache, with a view to concealing it.

“Besides, if I had telegraphed,” John Dundas was saying whilst he thought this out, “I should have let that rascal Hawkins know of my intended return. That would have put him on his guard. And there was no time for an explanatory letter as I started as soon as ever I could.”

“You are a man of business,” said Featherston, smiling blandly. “You arrange your affairs with speed, and no doubt with discretion. Good night, then; I will not keep you longer from Mrs. Dundas, lest I incur her severe displeasure.”

He shook hands in the friendliest way, and the night was too dark to permit of Mr. Dundas's seeing the smile of cruel amusement that curved his lips as the last words escaped him. Mr. Dundas disappeared into the windy night, and moved steadily onwards towards his home.

The soft, misty rain that now was falling and

beating against his face only seemed to refresh him. He walked rapidly, with an elastic step, feeling that each moment brought him near to her. His heart was full of delight. He felt indeed almost absurdly happy, and an inclination to laugh aloud overtook him now and then, as he thought of how her beautiful face would light up with a glad surprise as he stepped into her presence, and how her clear, sweet laugh would ring out when he confessed to her his foolish fancy to surprise her, had brought him to the level of the most youthful love-sick swain.

There would be the little fond rush towards him. No; first the start, and *then* the little rush; and then the clasp of the warm, slender hands around his neck, and then — then she would kiss him—as she alone could kiss, his beloved! His own!

Ah! there lay the charm. Other men had been, perhaps, ordinarily happy, even with a love they had known to be not altogether theirs; but it was not so with him. He was entirely different. Heart, and soul, and sweet body, she was all his. Once again he could hear her voice, rising out of the many times she had sworn it to him.

He reached the entrance gate at last, and entered the long avenue, now dark as Erebus, because of the overhanging branches. He struck a match, and saw by his watch that it was five minutes past eleven. So late! He hoped she had not gone to bed. If so, his sweet programme would be in a measure spoiled. He knew that she sat up very often almost until midnight reading; but now that he was away she would, no doubt, feel lonely, and would, probably, retire earlier than usual.

A turn in the avenue, however, told him that this was not the case. Through an opening in the trees the whole of the southern side of the house was laid bare to him, and he could see that lights shone in two of the central windows. They were the windows of the room she most affected—her favourite room.

She was still awake, then. All the rest of the

house was sunk in darkness, so that he knew the servants were in bed. How lonely for her, poor darling, keeping her vigil thus alone!

He hurried forward until he came to the foot of the steps that led up to the balcony, off which the room opened. He paused there with a quiet smile, and began to ascend the steps with extreme caution. Not a sound betrayed his approach. When half-way up, he stopped for a moment, and put his hand in his breast-pocket to make sure that the costly diamond trinket he had bought for her was there and safe. Then once again he commenced to mount the steps, silently, carefully, one by one, making no faintest noise, so that her surprise might be complete.

The soft, misty rain was still descending—all the stars were obliterated—the falling of the heavy drops, as they accumulated on the branches of the huge elms, could every now and then be heard as they sunk sullenly into the earth. The awning that all that long day had kept out the brilliant sunshine was now soaked through and through; but the Persian mats that strewed the balcony were still dry. As Mr. Dundas stepped on to them he smiled again—a large, amused smile. They deadened the sound of his footsteps, and would help him to carry out this fond if foolish design of his.

The blinds were down in both the windows, and before the glass door, which was open, hung a heavy velvet curtain. Mr. Dundas, putting out his hand, drew a corner of it aside, very cautiously, and looked in. Beyond the velvet hung a lace curtain of the most fragile kind, and through it he saw——

CHAPTER L.

SHOWING HOW NEMESIS WATCHED IN THE WIND AND
RAIN.

THE lamps were partially lowered, and the soft crimson light shed by the coloured shades flooded the room but delicately—the pretty room, the walls of which were hung with pearl-gray satin, caught by ivory knots here and there—the room he had decked and garnished for her with all care out of the plenitude of his love. It was now shrouded in a seductive gloom, through which little marble loves and graces, naked nymphs and daring cupids gleamed voluptuously from their cabinets and brackets. A Venus, fresh from the salt foam, smiled amorously from a buhl table upon a form half hidden in roses.

A subtle sense of perfume hung over everything, the breath, as it were, of those dying flowers. Roses were everywhere; great bunches of them, white, golden, red as the heart's blood, filled every corner. One or two lay, as if wantonly cast there out of the prodigality of their numbers, upon the floor.

All this in a dull way was known to Dundas, though he did not believe he saw anything except the scene being enacted at the farthest end of the room. All his senses were riveted upon the spot, where, on a satin couch, her dainty head nestling luxuriously amongst the cushions, lay—his wife!

She was dressed in a loose white tea-gown, an exquisite mass of soft laces, a little open at the throat, and with wide sleeves that, falling backwards as she lifted her arms, left all their snowy loveliness naked to the shoulder. One of these arms was thrown around Lord Varley's neck.

He was kneeling beside her on the ground,

leaning over her so that his face was close to hers. Both his arms were clasped around her supple waist.

Donna was talking gaily, but in a low whisper. A soft, happy smile, a smile a little languid, parted her lips.

"Ah! to-morrow night!" exclaimed he, as if in answer to something she had said. "Where shall we be to-morrow night?"

"Far from here, at all events," returned she lightly. "Far from the stifling propriety of this intolerable hole. And, oh, blessed thought! far from the immaculate Dundas."

"A fool so blind is hardly deserving even of one's pity," said Varley contemptuously.

"Blind to what? My faults? What an unlover-like speech!" As she spoke, she ran her white, slender fingers slowly, lingeringly through his hair, as though to touch him was sweet to her.

"Have you a fault?"

"One. Just one little one. You know it." She leaned even nearer to him, and smiled into his eyes. "'Tis loving thee too well.'"

His arms tightened their clasp round her. A low, long sigh escaped him. For a minute there was silence, broken only by the beating of his heart; and then Donna fell back a little from him, and broke into a low, delicious laugh of heartfelt amusement.

"If he could only see me now!" she said, in a subdued tone, yet every syllable reached the ears of the listening man, standing spell-bound, frozen behind the curtain, as clearly as though they had been shouted in his ears. "Was ever a man so befooled? You should have seen him sometimes, when I ran up to him to offer one of my pretty, innocent, wifely caresses to the author of my boredom! His face would be a picture—he would hold me from him at arm's length—*so*—to prolong the joy of it, and laugh with an idiotic delight when I pretended to pout at being kept from his embrace so long! Pah! Poor old Samson! Sometimes I have seen his lips move as he thanked heaven for

the gift of my love. *Mine!* What a comedy, when one thinks of you waiting for me in the shrubbery at the very moment!"

She laughed again. The old, noiseless laugh this time. And as he watched her through the lace hangings, the fingers of the listening man closed with a remorseless grip upon the velvet curtain he was holding back.

"What a little devil you are!" said Varley, in a tone of absolute admiration.

"*Your* little devil, at all events!" returned she, tightening the arm that clasped his neck, and drawing him nearer to her.

"And my very soul!" whispered he, in a tone of open passion, pressing his lips with a vehement force to the exquisite naked arm that brushed his cheek. "Donna, tell me once again that you love me!"

"It is too poor a word," murmured she tremulously. And then she swayed a little towards him; her head sank upon his breast. . . Their lips met.

Mr. Dundas stepped back into the darkness noiselessly as he had come. Once again the Persian rugs came to his aid, dulling the sound of his swift footsteps as he walked down the balcony to its end where his own den lay. He tried the window and found it unfastened. Throwing up the sash softly, but with haste, he stepped lightly into the room.

He groped about carefully for a moment or two in the darkness, and, getting impatient at last, took a match from his pocket. But, after a second's reflection, put it back again. No, he would not risk even so much. He would risk nothing. He felt himself singularly calm and collected, and once more began his search in a blackness that might be felt.

He came at last to the drawer of the cabinet he wanted, and drawing something from it, examined

it by touch, and having satisfied himself that all was right, tried to conceal it in the large breast-pocket of his travelling-coat. But something prevented him. It was the jewel-case he had felt with such loving fingers as he came up the stone steps just now.

Just now! Great heaven! *Could* it have been only just now? Could such words apply to it? Was it not rather a thousand years ago? In another age—another lifetime! He caught the case in his hand, dragged it from his pocket with a ferocious gesture, and hurled it from him.

It fell with a sharp sound against the opposite wall. This restored him to himself at once, and woke within him a terrible fear. Had it been heard? He crept on tiptoe to the window, and listened breathlessly for a moment in the rain-swept night; but nothing came. If, by that mad act, he had been foiled? But, no; no human power should foil him now!

He pressed convulsively to his heart the thing he had concealed there, and went back to the velvet-hung doorway. There was nothing to prevent his entering. They (the two within) had felt themselves so secure, so happy in his absence, so engrossed with the thought that to-morrow would take them far from all fear of discovery, that they had, with an almost insolent disregard of caution, left wide that fatal door. The night, in spite of the steady downpour, was warm to suffocation, as it might be on the eve of a thunder-storm.

He looked once again into the room that held the shaded lamps—his wife—her lover—and all the dead ashes of his life. Everything was at an end. He felt no keen pain, no desire to upbraid her, no passionate resentment—only a knowledge that death was not far off. Already the smell of the charnel-house was choking him. He had seldom felt so calm in her presence as he felt now, standing there motionless in the soaking rain, gazing in on the ruins of his *château en Espagne* he had so often deemed the fairest ever built.

They were laughing still. They were drawn even closer round each other—arms entwined within arms. To him, watching, there seemed to be something extraordinary in their gaiety—a gaiety that jested on the grave's brink. Was there no grave misgiving, no hidden sense of fear, to warn them that the end of all things was at hand?

He pushed aside the curtains with a bold movement, and stood revealed.

CHAPTER LI.

SHOWING HOW DONNA PLEADED—AND IN VAIN.

THE gay laugh died on Donna's lips, as she looked over her lover's shoulder, and saw vengeance there before her, ready to strike. Her face grew an ashen gray. She seemed to stiffen in Varley's arms, and an awful look darkened her eyes. Varley, startled by the change in her, looked backwards, and, with a terrible imprecation, sprang to his feet, to find himself face to face with the man he had dishonoured!

Was it only a minute, or was it in truth an eternity that elapsed whilst they three stood there, gazing silently upon each other?

Dundas broke the spell.

"Stand back!" he said, in a clear tone, addressing Varley. "Over there, with your back against that wall! I don't want to shoot you both!"

He put his hand into his breast-pocket, and drew out a revolver. He fingered it, slowly, cruelly, lovingly.

"So!" said Varley, with a shrug. Any dismay he might have felt was now gone, and a smile, that

was undeniably insolent, grew on his face. "You won't even give me my chance, then?" he said.

"No!" distinctly, and without haste or excitement of any kind. "You have done with chances. I shall shoot you as I would a dog!"

"I find no fault. I really think I should do the same in your place," said Varley politely. "I have but one request to make, that you will permit Mrs. Dundas to leave the room—first."

"I am not in a position to forbid or permit. She is nothing to me whatsoever," said Dundas stonily.

"Go!" said Varley, turning abruptly to her.

"Where?" she asked. Her voice startled him, it was so changed. Her face was livid, and, by contrast with it, her red hair seemed to have taken an intenser shade. Her eyes were gleaming.

"Anywhere out of this," he said. Then in a lower tone: "It is my last request. The last I shall ever make you or any one, for there is no doubt about his meaning. See, then, that you obey it."

"I shall not stir," she cried, in a loud voice. She stood erect, and faced Dundas with a mocking, insolent air, and threw out her right hand towards him with a gesture that was audacious. "I defy you!" she said contemptuously. "I dare you to do your worst! Poor fool, whom I have tricked so easily and so well!"

She had placed herself before Varley, and as she finished, she broke into a low laugh, scornful, tremulous with hatred. This man—this "poor fool"—had balked her!

Varley echoed the laugh involuntarily. He was, in spite of the sure and awful fate so swiftly bearing down upon him, touched by the seuse of humour in the play. As he listened to them, Dundas's face underwent a change; the dull calmness died a little, and an expression that was devilish grew there. He raised and levelled the revolver.

"I give you one minute to move aside," he said, addressing his wife for the first time.

Something in his tone awoke conviction in her breast. His sudden appearance had naturally terrified her for the moment, but his determination to shoot Varley she had not been able to realise. It was a threat—an outbreak of passion, nothing more.

Now, as she looked into his dead white face, so cold, so quiet, so fatally relentless—as she heard the iron resolution that marked his tone, a great trembling took possession of her limbs, and she shivered as if with mortal cold. She threw herself on the ground—always before Varley—and held out her arms to her husband.

“Have pity!” she gasped.

“Ay, such pity as you have shown me!”

She crawled towards him across the carpet on her knees, and clung to him in a frenzied fashion.

“Listen—hear me!” she panted. “He is all I have—*all*. My whole life I have loved him. *Give* me his life! We”—eagerly, hopefully—“we shall not trouble you in any way. We will go away together—he and I—and——”

A fierce curse passed his lips. He struggled to free himself from her, but she clung to him with the tenacity of despair. She lifted one hand, and grasped the arm that held the revolver with her long, nervous, shapely fingers. Her head was thrown back. Her fair throat, her exquisite, deathlike face, her starry eyes, all were before him. That face, for which he would have gladly died only an hour ago! She was pleading—the miserable, beautiful creature—as if for her very soul—and to *him*!

“Nay, but grant me one moment’s hearing,” she cried, “one poor moment. See now! Of what use will it be to you to kill him? Death will take him out of your path, no doubt; but if that is what you want, give him to me, *I* shall take him as surely. We shall pass out of your life as though we had never been—as entirely as though you had indeed slain us. You will forget us. In time you will be glad you spared him. Ah! think of *that*.”

In all the future before you there will be no undying, burning remorse."

"I shall feel no remorse for such a deed as this. And you," turning upon her furiously, "what should you know of remorse? Will *you* feel it, think you?"

"Put me out of the question. Forget," with an eloquent gesture, "that I ever existed. Think of yourself now. I tell you that if you now refrain, the day will come when you will bless me for this hour. Let us go. As you hope for *heaven*, pause now."

"I hope for nothing. You have killed hope!" His voice was once again so utterly emotionless, that it struck despair to her heart.

"Have mercy, nevertheless," she entreated faintly.

"You have killed mercy, too!"

His manner was indeed merciless. A horrible sensation seized upon her; she was *frightened*! For the first time in all her reckless, daring life, fear—black, vague, awful—held her in its grasp. She felt as if her senses were deserting her. She made one more effort to gain time, and fight off this terror that threatened to overpower her.

"It was all my fault," she cried. "All! I swear it. I lured him on until it was too late to think of honour or withdrawal. I loved him so, I tell you, that—that——"

She broke off with a wild cry. He had caught her in a paroxysm of fury, and flung her from him. Varley rushed forward, but she stayed him with uplifted hand. She knew by Dundas's eyes that he was now dangerous, and that he would fire if Varley touched her.

"Can I not speak?" she cried passionately.

"Silence, woman!" thundered Dundas. "Have you *no* shame, then? What! you fair-faced serpent, with your lying eyes and false lips, must you kneel in the dust for *me* to pardon you? Oh, smooth-tongued Delilah! You, who have lain in my bosom, and fawned upon me, and kissed and kissed again to

blind my eyes, lest I should see! You, whom I judged dearer than my life; to whom my very soul was laid bare! What thing was there denied you? Was I cruel, hard, exacting? In what lay my crime that you should betray me in such base wise? You would have pity—mercy—and from me! You would crawl at my feet to grant your lover's life! Why, how is this, girl? You, who so love romance, is not the night full of it? Is not the one chosen of your heart, now about to die for you—for *you*, who have given him to death's cold arms? Yours were softer, perchance; but then the romance—the romance of it! 'Tis worth a life or two! Ay, stand up! Stand forth and look upon your work, and rejoice in it."

At this all the tiger that was in her broke loose. She sprang upon him and clutched his throat with her hands.

"Seize him!" she called to Varley. And then to him: "Do you think you will do this thing? I tell you, I'll strangle you with my own hands first." She hissed the words through her teeth. But a second later he had spurned her from him as easily as though she had been a child, and she fell tottering into Varley's arms.

"Don't be a fool, Don," said he, in a low tone. "After all, it is only the work of a moment, and—we have had our good time—our mad, sweet love, in spite of everything. There! Kiss me, sweetheart, and don't ever—*quite* forget!"

A low moan broke from her; her clasp tightened round him, and her dry, wild eyes gazed desperately into his.

"Curse him!" she said hoarsely. "But if he does this thing, mark you, he too shall die. Be sure of that."

There is a fierceness in her tone that sends a vehement shudder through and through her slender frame.

"Let such thoughts go by you," said Varley, with a sudden strange gravity, born perhaps of the

near death that was hovering over him, and of some natural grace that all her sorceries had not entirely destroyed. The soul given him from heaven spoke in those words. "Were I he, would I see you robbed from me, and make no sign? Justice lies with him; triumph with me. The best of you—your heart, your love—was mine. Therefore, forgive him, sweet."

"Not whilst I have life. *Life!*" A piteous light came into her eyes. "Oh, that I should have life, when *you*—— But I *will* not!"

"Hush! Do not let us waste the time he grants. You will live for my sake, if only to remember."

"Ay, perhaps; and to revenge!"

"Stand aside, woman. His hour has come!" rang out Dundas sharply.

A wild cry broke from her. She threw herself on Varley's breast, as if to protect his body with her own, and, encircling him with her arms, looked back over her shoulder at her husband with a mad defiance.

"That will not save him," he said. "If you persist in staying there, I shall shoot him through the brain instead of through the heart. That will be the only difference."

Donna moved her head hurriedly from side to side as though looking vainly for some means of escape. None came. The room was far from the servants' quarters, and to hope to rouse them even by the loudest screams would be mere folly. She had weighed all that long ago, and found it wanting. And yet time—time—that was the principal thing to be gained! Varley was as strong a man, perhaps, as Dundas, but then he was unarmed, and she knew if he made one step towards his adversary, Dundas would fire. They were trapped as rats might be, and as little mercy would be shown them.

"Stand up, man, and fling your wanton to one side, if you would not have her blood flow with yours," cried John Dundas savagely. "Are you *afraid*, that you seek to shelter yourself behind her?"

"Afraid!" A light, scornful laugh broke from Varley. For yet one short moment he held against his breast, with a convulsive pressure, his heart's desire, and then he partially released her. "Kiss me," he whispered softly; and as her lips met his, all at once, as it were, a strange animation grew upon him. He raised her to a more upright position. "See," he whispered eagerly, pointing to the open window on the right hand, well guarded by Dundas; "liberty may lie there!"

"Ah!" she started, brought to fresh life and hope by his tone, and turned to where he pointed. Even as she did so, he signalled to Dundas.

"Now!" he called loudly, and before the echo of his voice died away the loud report of a revolver, that had sent a bullet through his heart, rang through the room.

He fell forward on his face stone dead! Ay, even before she could turn again to clasp him, he was stretched lifeless at her feet!

Almost simultaneously with the discharge of the revolver there was a rush of feet upon the balcony without, and the velvet curtain was thrust violently aside!

CHAPTER LII.

SHOWING HOW THE LAST ACT WAS PLAYED.

ON the threshold stood Lady Varley, and behind her Stronge and Carew O'Grady. They all stood there motionless as if stricken into stone, gazing on the scene before them. A man dead, already more calm, more placid than he had ever been in life; a man living, yet with death upon his face, and head bowed stubbornly upon his breast; a woman cast brokenly upon the ground, with her arms flung about the silent corpse; all her rich red hair had come unbound, and covered his breast as if with a shroud.

Stronge, who was the first to recover himself, laid his hand on Lady Varley's arm and tried to force her backwards. But she shook him off; she would not be repelled. As one in a dream she moved swiftly forwards until she reached the blood that was oozing from the quiet body, staining the dainty carpet as it came. She stood over him and gazed down upon his lifeless form, and upon the woman whose face was hidden on his breast, and whose despairing arms were wound about him. She, too, might have been dead; scarce so much breath came from her, as might mean life. No stir, no movement. . . .

"What does this woman here?" said Lady Varley, in a low, clear tone. It penetrated even to the ears of Donna. Slowly she raised her head, and looked at Lady Varley with a dull despair. There was in her haggard eyes so great an agony, that it rendered her sacred.

"The wrong is yours," she said, "yet to you I plead. Say no harsh word here. Not near him. To disturb—to hurt——"

She seemed to lose herself a little, and a long, heavy sigh escaped her. She leaned over the poor, dead face, and tenderly, lovingly, smoothed back

a little bit of hair that had strayed over the pale forehead. It seemed so cruel that it should be out of place now—now when he himself could not lift one finger to arrange it. So helpless now—and yet a little minute since——

She smoothed the hair softly, and ran her fingers fondly, lightly over his face, closing the half-opened eyes. There was a tiny speck of dust upon his white tie, and this, too, she carefully removed. With her hands upon the carpet at each side of his head, she leaned over him, gazing on his face as though she could never look her fill.

It was a most piteous sight. Yolande, overwhelmed by it, sank on her knees and covered her eyes with her hands. All was swept from her remembrance, save the awful, unavailing grief of this wretched woman.

Her sudden action roused Donna. She turned and again addressed her.

“You are a good woman,” she said in a subdued, monotonous way. “You could not understand such as I. But I loved him and you never did; my love for him taught me that, carefully as you hid your secret. Leave him to me now. Do not forbid me; do not deny my stronger claim to him; do not grudge him this last solace. We were miserable always—let us be together now. Go! go away. This is no place for you. Leave me alone with my dead.”

She spoke incoherently. Her head sank back upon his breast. Once again her arms closed round his stiffening form. Upon the white of her gown a great crimson stain was spreading. It was his life-blood.

Lady Varley sickened at the sight. She rose to her feet in a wild, shuddering haste, and looked helplessly around her. She swayed a little, but when O’Grady came quickly towards her, she shrank from him, and it was to Andrew Stronge she held out her hands with a choking cry.

He caught her as she fell, and carried her out

of the room and down the stairs to the hall, where he stumbled against a woman. It was the girl Kitty; who, knowing all, had followed her mistress faithfully, in fear and trembling.

He left her in her care, with instructions to rouse the servants—who now, indeed, were hurrying from all quarters, roused by the sound of the revolver. Having given hurried orders that a carriage be brought round immediately from the stables, and that Lady Varley be conveyed direct to The Cottage, he once more returned to the fatal chamber.

As he drew near it, he found the sacred silence was broken. A voice shrill, frenzied, was ringing through the room. Mrs. Dundas had risen, and was denouncing her husband as the murderer of her lover. She turned to Stronge as he entered, and began again her denunciation; she looked like a beautiful fury; with her hair streaming, her face ghastly with its savage desire for vengeance.

"Ay, vengeance," she cried. "I will have it. So much I promised him. I will wring it from earth and sky." She caught hold of Stronge's hand and compelled him to face the appalling spectacle that lay on the ground so fearfully near him. "See, see," she said, "where he lies. Never more will his eyes behold me; never again will his arms enfold me." She broke off to cry aloud to heaven.

"Help me to my revenge," she entreated Stronge presently. "You can see he has been foully killed, and there," pointing to where Dundas stood with his arms folded and his eyes fixed on her—on her only, "there stands his murderer! Seize him, I command you."

O'Grady went quickly up to Dundas.

"Fly," he said in a hurried whisper. "There is yet time. Go through that doorway, and down the balcony steps. Hurry, man, we will give you a start. We know how you were tempted. Make haste, I say. What demon urges you to hesitate? Soon, we may not be able to connive at your escape. It is in our

power now, it may not be so five minutes hence. Already I hear footsteps downstairs. Great heaven, what madness induces you to delay?"

A curious smile parted Dundas's lips. He touched O'Grady lightly on the shoulder though he did not look at him. His gaze was riveted on the spot where Donna stood.

"Too late even if I had cared to prolong my life," he said. "Nemesis is already on my track. *Look at her!*"

O'Grady followed his gaze. Donna, who had been commanding Stronge's aid, was now looking towards them; suspicion lit her eyes. As though fearing to be baffled, deprived of her revenge, she rushed forward, and dashing O'Grady aside with superhuman force, seized hold of Dundas. Her eyes blazed, there was madness in them.

Stronge caught and held her back from him, restraining her as gently as he could. But restraint of any kind that kept her from securing the object of her vengeance infuriated her.

"You would let him go," she shrieked, struggling in Stronge's grasp. "You will defraud me of my prey. Oh, earth! oh, heaven! is there no justice anywhere? Nay, he *shall* die, I tell you. A life for a life! Ten thousand of such paltry lives as his would not slake my thirst. Stand back! Release me if you be men. Oh, to *see* him die! The rope—the cap—the shame! Oh, to see it!"

She laughed frantically, and glared at Dundas, who was standing motionless, making no effort to avail himself of that chance of escape pointed out to him by O'Grady, and which she was so fearful of his obtaining.

He came slowly up to her, and, by a little wave of the hand, put back the two who were still holding her.

"You are not yet satisfied, then?" he said, gazing at her with that same strange smile that now seemed frozen on his lips. "You have taken from me, faith, hope, joy, yet still you crave my blood? Take it, then!"

Before Stronge, who was nearest to him, could interfere, he had lifted the revolver to his mouth. It was all over in a moment. He was lying face downwards mercifully, and even whilst they looked with a horrible fascination that could not be conquered, the last quick, tremulous shudder ran through him.

They scarcely drew their breath. But after a bit O'Grady broke down, and covering his face with his hands gave way to a fit of tearless sobbing. This unsettled Stronge, and presently the tears began to run down his cheeks.

As for Donna, she stood there motionless, her body drawn up into a rigid attitude, her face livid. All meaning seemed to have flown from her face. It was a mere beautiful mask. And presently, oh, so slowly, so sluggishly, a thick red stream began to creep from under that hidden, mutilated head. Straight towards her it crept with a dull haste, but with a deadly surety. She shrank back, but it *followed* her. Back still, clutching a chair as she went with stiffening fingers, and with dilated eyes fixed always on that awful pursuer. Back still until she touched the wall.

Her mind was so far gone that she could imagine no other means of escape than that backward one; and slowly, but ever nearer, came that crimson flood. Stealthily, an inch now, a little rush then, creeping, crawling, until at last it *caught* her.

It touched the hem of her white gown, and reddened it. How the stain grew! It seemed as though his blood, having found her, had resolved to merge itself in her—his murderess! For a moment, as if fascinated, she stood staring at it with wide, awful eyes. Then an unearthly scream escaped her. Peal after peal of horrible laughter followed, and presently they bore her from the room securely pinioned—a raving maniac.

CHAPTER LIII.

SHOWING HOW MRS. STRONGE REGARDED THE FUTURE WITH
A CAREFUL EYE.

"ANDY! Andy! I say, Andy!" No answer.
"Bother that man; he is never to be found.
An—dy!"

She had run through the gardens, and now, just as she reached a lawn, on which small haycocks lay, like so many shapes turned out of moulds, a frowsy head rose from behind one of them, and Mr. Stronge stood revealed.

He was a sight to behold. Every individual hair stood on end, and each hair was adorned with an airy bit of hay.

"You, Connie? Hey! What—what's the matter?" said he, making a lamentable attempt at appearing wide awake.

"You've been asleep!" said Constantia, marching down upon him. "Snoring asleep! And is this how you take care of The Boy?"

The capitals were enormous. She had peeped round the haycock first thing, to find The Boy "snoring asleep" too, with his lovely fists doubled up under his rosy chin; but not for all that would she let off her culprit.

"Asleep!" cried Mr. Stronge, with extravagant astonishment and a deep reproach. "My darling, nonsense! I assure you——"

"Don't call me your darling nonsense. After begging on your knees to be allowed to carry that child down to the hay-field, and after my weak consenting to your prayer, the end of it all is that you go deliberately to sleep, and let him wander away to his destruction. Have you forgotten that there is a pond close by into which he might have fallen?"

"Not whilst *I* was here to keep watch and ward over him," said Mr. Stronge, as doughtily as though sleep and he had parted company these years past.

"You, indeed!" she said. "Just look at your head. You're a regular Ophelia."

"Ophelia was a female," said Mr. Stronge, with dignity, "and a mad one. She was unpleasantly irresponsible, and she ran remarkably wild. I never run farther than I can help. I brought your son down to this field, thinking to instruct him in the matter of trefoils; but when he stuck his ill-mannered thumb into his mouth, and declined any further instruction, I sat beside him whilst he dozed, and meditated upon metaphysics."

"Stuff!" said Mrs. Stronge. She had subsided upon the haystack beside him, however, and now looked at him with all the air of one who has a state matter of European importance to declare.

"You've come about something," said he, not having studied her in vain for these past three happy years. "Get it off your shoulders without delay, and you'll be twice the woman you are now. That's a telegram—eh?" pointing to a bit of dingy red paper she was squeezing up in her hand. "Anything of vital importance going forward? A balloon accident? Any more dynamitards not seized? An eruption of Mount Vesuvius? Old Gladstone brought to the block?"

"No such luck," said she, referring to the last catastrophe. "But yet," brightening, "great luck. What do you think? I've had a telegram from Carew O'Grady, telling me of the birth of a little girl to him and Yolande!"

"No!" exclaimed Mr. Stronge, who was now as wide awake as she could wish him. And then—"By Jove! she lost no time," he said.

Now, this innocent remark was received by her with distinct disfavour.

"I don't know what you mean by that," she said severely. "I suppose she took as long as anybody else. And, at all events, I thought you'd be glad

to hear she had got something to replace that poor little angel she lost."

"I declare I'm more glad than I can tell you," said Strouge sincerely. "It's the happiest thing for her, poor thing. And now that she's got O'Grady and the baby, I don't see why the rest of her life at least shouldn't run smoothly."

"Garrett told me yesterday," she said gravely, "that that unfortunate woman's case is worse than ever. No signs of returning sanity."

"A most merciful thing, according to my judgment."

"Yes—yes; I suppose so."

"Let us talk of something else," said Stronge hastily, who had never quite overcome a certain sense of faintness attendant on any reference to that past awful scene. "Did you hear," he said, "that Featherston has been defeated? Daly, the Nationalist, got in on an amazing majority."

"Why, yes," she said; "Norah was full of it this afternoon. It appears that old Lord Killeens, whose interest meant everything to him, found out some time ago that he was hardly," with a little smile, "so sincere a Blue Ribbonite as he had fondly believed him. The old man was furious when he found it out, Norah says. Garrett told her. He tells her everything, it seems; and I am sure will end by making her a confirmed gossip."

"Or his wife."

"Oh, nonsense! Such a baby as Norah! Well, at all events, Lord Killeens had his revenge on Featherston over this election. He put up another Conservative—Fitzgerald—backed him with all his might, and so smashed Featherston."

"And so spoiled our chance of getting in a Conservative at all. To divide the votes like that! Natural, perhaps, but very foolish in such a crisis as this. But that old graybeard would sell——"

"His wife to gain his point. Is that what you would say, you base man?"

"By no means. She would not fetch enough to

gratify the mildest form of any passion. His soul, I was going to suggest, when you interrupted me in that rude manner."

"Well, never mind," said she; "let us go back to Yolande and her pretty baby."

"D'ye mean to say O'Grady wired word of its beauty?"

"Oh, no. No, of *course* not; but I feel sure it is a beauty. Most babies are," said Mrs. Stronge, with conviction.

Stronge had a good deal to say on this point, but he caught his wife's eye as he opened his lips, and he quailed.

"Isn't it delightful that it's a girl?" said she.

"I don't know. I expect they would have thought more of it had it been a boy."

"Oh! that's not it," said she vaguely. "Do you mean to say you don't see the importance of its being a girl?"

"No, I don't," said Stronge, who sometimes found courage to say what he meant.

"Oh, Andy! Well, I wouldn't be as stupid as you for a good deal. You can say that, with that darling boy asleep at your elbow."

"I can, certainly; indeed, the fact of the 'darling boy' being there at all, asleep or awake, is just what makes me say it. I can remember an hour when a certain young woman told me that she pitied all other poor women who had only girls to fall back upon, and that was when the 'darling boy' was just ten minutes old. And that young woman wasn't the nurse, mind! And there wasn't a soul in the room at the time, save the nurse, and me, and——"

"The only woman you ever loved," put in Constantia with a serene air, and a severe pinch. "Now, listen to reason, do. Can't you really see why it is so delightful that Yolande and Carew should have had a girl?"

"No."

"Why, because, when they both grow up, our boy will marry her girl! eh, old goose? Now have

you grasped it? I quite made up my mind to it ages ago."

"Good heavens! You don't mean to tell me you arranged what the child's sex should be before it was born?"

"Well, I arranged it five minutes ago, at all events. It's just the same," said she airily.

At this moment Master Stronge thought proper to awake from his slumber. He rolled himself round, kicked out his right leg with an astonishing vigour, and gave way to a lusty roar.

"Bless his darling lungs!" said his mother proudly, as she picked him out of the hay.

THE END.

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